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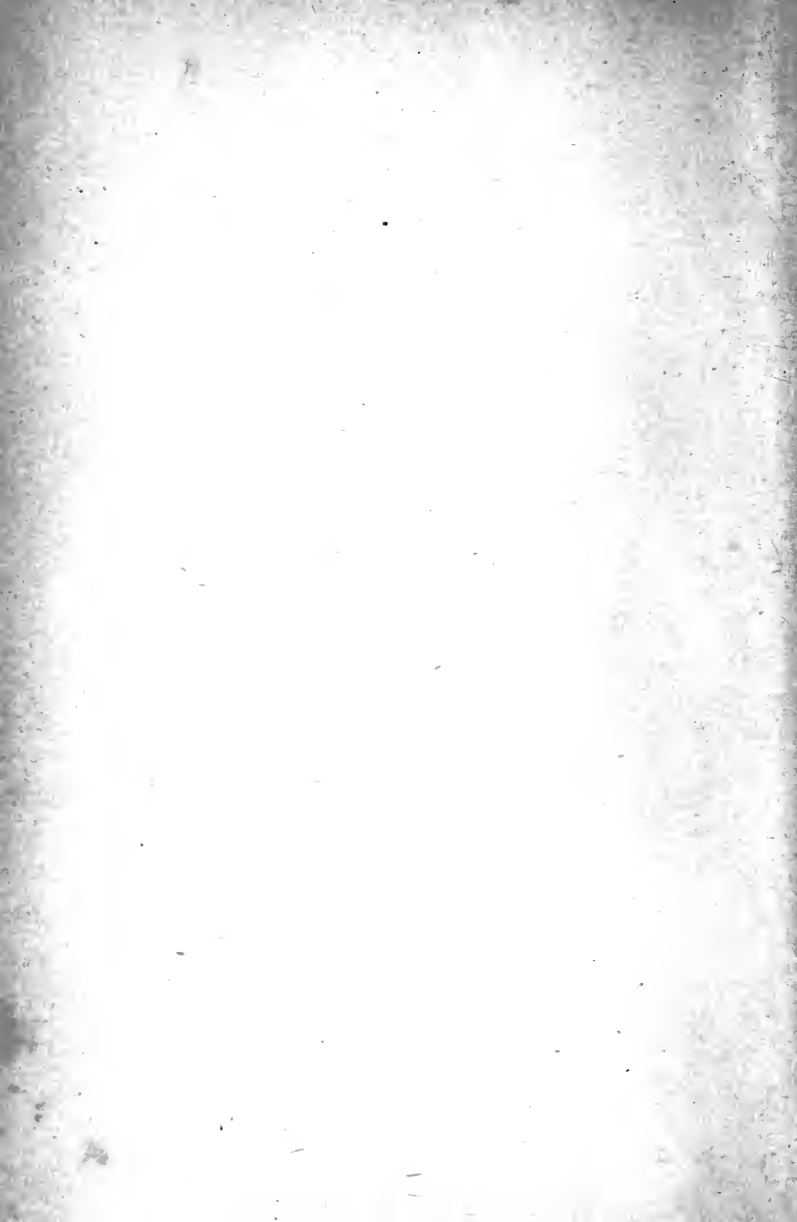
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THE NEW RECTOR

VOL. II.

THE
NEW RECTOR

BY
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AUTHOR OF 'THE HOUSE OF THE WOLF'

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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THE NEW RECTOR



CHAPTER XV

THE BAZAAR

BEFORE noon on the next day the service of the writ at the rectory had become known in the town; and the course which the churchwardens had taken was freely canvassed in more houses than one. They had on their side all the advantages of prescription, however, while of the rector people said that there was no smoke without fire, and that he would not have become the subject of so many comments and strictures, and the centre of more than one dispute, without being in fault. There had been none of these

squabbles in old Mr. Williams's time, they said. Tongues had not wagged about him. But then, they added, he had not aspired to drive tandem with the Homfrays! The town had been good enough for him. He had not wanted to have everything his own way, nor thought himself a small Jupiter in the place. His head had not been turned by a little authority conferred too early, and conferred, if all the town heard was true, in some very odd and unsatisfactory manner.

To know that all round you people are saying that your conceit has led you into trouble is not pleasant. And in one way and another this impression was brought home to the young rector more than once during these days; so that his cheek flamed as he passed the window of the reading-room, or caught the half-restrained sniggle in which Gregg ventured to indulge when in company. Nor were these annoyances all Lindo had to bear.

The archdeacon scolded him roundly for placing the matter in the hands of the lawyers without consulting him. Mrs. Hammond looked grave. Laura seemed less friendly than a little time back. Clode's conduct was odd, too, and unsatisfactory. He was sometimes enthusiastic and loyal, ready to back up his superior as warmly as could be wished; and anon he would show himself the reverse of all this—sullen, repellent, and absolutely unsympathetic.

Altogether the rector was not having a very sunny time, although the heat of conflict kept him warm, and he threw back his blonde head and set his face very hard as he strode about the town, his long-tailed black coat flapping behind him. Little guessing what was being said, he hugged himself more than ever on the one thing which his opponents could not take from him. When all was said and done, he fancied, in his inno-

cence, he must still be rector of Claversham. If his promotion had not brought him as much happiness as he had expected, if he had not been able to do in his new position all he had hoped, the promotion and the position were yet undeniable. Knowing so well all the circumstances of his appointment, he did not give two thoughts to the curious story Kate Bonamy had told him. It did not create a single misgiving in his mind. He was sorry that he had treated her so cavalierly, and more than once he thought with regret almost tender of the girl and the interview. But, for the rest, he treated it as the ignorant invention of the enemy. Possibly on the strength of certain 'Varsity prejudices he was a little too prone to exaggerate the ignorance of Claversham.

On the day before the bazaar a visitor arrived in Claversham. The stranger was a small, dark, sharp-featured man, with a pecu-

liarly alert manner, whom the reader will remember to have met in the Temple. Jack Smith, for he it was—we parted from him last at Euston Station—may have come over on his own motion, or acting upon a hint from Mr. Bonamy, who since the refusal of Gregg's offer, had thought more and more of the future which lay before his girls. The dark, quiet house had seemed more and more dull, not to him in his own person, but to him considering it in the night-watches through their eyes. Hitherto the lawyer had not encouraged the young Londoner's visits, perhaps because he dreaded the changes of various kinds which he might be forced to make. But now, whether he had given him a hint to come or not, he received him with undoubted cordiality.

Almost the first question Jack asked, Daintry hanging over the back of his chair and Kate smiling in more subdued radiance

opposite him, was about his friend, the rector. Fortunately, Mr. Bonamy was not in the room. 'And how about Lindo?' he asked. 'Have you seen much of him, Kate?'

'No, we have not seen much of him,' she answered, getting up to put something straight which was not greatly awry before.

'Father has, though,' Daintry explained, nodding her head seriously.

'Oh, he has, has he?'

'Yes. He has served him with a writ.'

Jack whistled as much in annoyance as surprise. 'A writ!' he exclaimed. 'What about?'

'About the sheep in the churchyard. Mr. Lindo turned them out,' Kate explained hurriedly, as if she wished to hear no more upon the subject.

But Jack was curious; and gradually he drew from them the story of the rector's iniquities, and acquired, as well, a pretty

correct notion of the state of things in the parish.

He whistled still more seriously then. 'It seems to me that the old man has been putting his foot in it here,' he said.

'He has,' Daintry answered solemnly, nodding any number of times. 'No end!'

'And yet he is the very best of fellows,' Jack replied, rubbing his short black hair in honest vexation. 'Don't you like him?'

'I did,' said Daintry, speaking for both of them.

'And you do not now?'

The child reddened, and rubbed herself shyly against Kate's chair. 'Well, not so much!' she murmured, Jack's eyes upon her. 'He is too big a swell for us.'

'Oh, that is it, is it?' Jack said contemptuously.

He pressed the matter no farther, and appeared to have forgotten the subject; but

presently, when he was alone with Kate, he recurred to it. 'So, Lindo has been putting on airs, has he?' he observed. 'Yet, I thought when Daintry wrote to me, after you left us, that she seemed to like him.'

'He was very kind and pleasant to us on our journey,' Kate answered, compelling herself to speak with indifference. 'But—well, you know, my father and he have not got on well; so, of course, we have seen little of him lately.'

'Oh, that is all, is it?' Jack answered, moving restlessly in his chair.

'That is all,' said Kate quietly.

This seemed to satisfy Jack, for at tea he surprised her—and as for Daintry, she fairly leapt in her seat—by calmly announcing that he proposed to call on the rector in the course of the evening. 'You have no objection, sir, I hope,' he said, coolly looking across at his host. 'He has been a friend of

mine for years, and though I hear you and he are at odds at present, it seems to me that that need not make mischief between us.'

'N—no,' said Mr. Bonamy slowly. 'I do not see why it should.'

Nevertheless, the lawyer was greatly astonished. He had heard that Jack and Mr. Lindo were acquainted, but he had thought nothing of it. It is possible that this discovery of something more than acquaintance existing between the two led him to take new views of the rector, for after a pause he continued, 'I dare say in private he is not an objectionable man, now?'

'Quite the reverse, I should say!' Jack answered stoutly.

'You have known him for some time?'

'For a long time, and very well.'

'Umph! Then it seems to me it is a pity he does not confine himself to private life,' the

lawyer concluded with a characteristic touch.

‘As a rector I do not like him!’

‘I am sorry for that,’ Jack answered cheerfully. ‘But I have not known much of him as a rector, you see, sir; though indeed, as it happens, he brought the offer of the living straight to me, and I was the first person who congratulated him on his promotion.’

Mr. Bonamy lifted his eyes slowly from the teacup he was raising to his lips, and looked fixedly at his visitor, his face wearing an expression much resembling strong curiosity. If a question was on the tip of his tongue he refrained from putting it, however, and Jack, who by no means wished to hear the tale of his friend’s shortcomings repeated, said no more until they rose from the table. Then he remarked, ‘Lindo dines late, I expect?’

He put the question to Kate, but the lawyer answered it. ‘Oh, yes, he does everything which is fashionable,’ he said drily.

And Jack, putting this and that together, began to see still more clearly how the land lay, and on what shoals his friend had wrecked his popularity.

About half-past eight he went to the rectory, but found that Lindo was not at home. The door was opened to him, however, by Mrs. Baxter, who had often seen the barrister in the East India Dock Road, and knew him well; and she pressed him to walk in and wait. 'He dined at home, sir,' she explained. 'I think he has only slipped out for a few minutes. I am sure he would wish you to wait.'

He followed her accordingly across the panelled hall to the study, where for a moment a whimsical smile played upon his face as he viewed its spacious comfort. The curtains were drawn, the fire was burning redly, and the lamp was turned half down. The housekeeper made as if she would have turned

it up, but he prevented her. 'I like it as it is,' he said genially. 'This is better than No. 383, Mrs. Baxter?'

'Well, sir,' she answered, looking round with an air of modest proprietorship, 'it is a bit more like.'

'What would you have?' he asked, laughing. 'The bishop's palace?'

'We may come to that in time, sir,' she answered, folding her arms demurely. 'But I do not know that I would wish it! He has a peck of troubles now, and there would be more in a palace, I doubt.'

'I agree with you,' Jack replied, laughing. 'Troubles come thick about an apron, Mrs. Baxter.'

'Ay, the men see to that!' the good lady retorted. And, having got the last word, she went away delighted.

Left alone, Jack lay back in an arm-chair, and, nursing his hat, wondered what Mrs.

Baxter would say when she discovered his connection with the Bonamys. From this his thoughts passed to Kate, but he had not been seated musing two minutes before he heard the door of the house open and shut, and a man's tread cross the hall. The next moment the study door opened, and a tall man appeared at it, and stood holding it and looking into the room. The hall lamp was behind the newcomer, and Jack, seeing that he was not the rector, sat still.

The stranger seemed to be satisfying himself that the room was empty, for after pausing a moment, he stepped in and closed the door behind him ; and, rapidly crossing the floor, stood before one of the bookcases. He took something—a key Jack judged by what followed—from his pocket, and with it he swiftly threw open a cupboard among the books.

There was nothing remarkable in the action ; but the stranger's manner was so

hurried and nervous, that the looker-on leaned forward, curious to learn what he was about. He expected to see him take something from the cupboard. Instead, the man appeared to put something in. What it was, however, Jack could not discern, for, leaning forward too far in his anxiety to do so, he upset his hat with some noise on to the floor.

The man started on the instant as if he had been subjected to a galvanic shock, and, turning, stood gazing in the direction of the noise. Jack heard him draw in his breath with the sharp sound of sudden fear, and even by that light could see that his face was drawn and white. The barrister rose quietly in the gloom, the stranger at sight of him leaning back against the bookcase as if his legs refused to support him. Yet he was the first to speak. 'Who is there?' he said, almost in a whisper.

‘A visitor,’ Jack answered simply. ‘I have been waiting to see Mr. Lindo.’

The curate—for he it was—drew a long breath, apparently of relief; in reality of such heartfelt thankfulness as he had never known before. ‘What a start you gave me!’ he murmured, his voice as yet scarcely under his control. ‘I am Mr. Clode, Mr. Lindo’s curate. I was putting up some parish papers, and thought the room was empty.’

‘So I saw,’ Jack answered drily. ‘I am afraid your nerves are a little out of order.’

The curate muttered something which was inaudible, and, raising his hand to the bookcase, locked the cupboard door and put the key in his pocket. Then he went to the lamp and turned it up. At the same moment Jack, recovering his hat, advanced into the circle of light, and the two men looked at one another. ‘I am afraid if you wish to see the rector you will be disappointed,’ the curate

said, with something of hauteur in his voice, assumed to hide his suspicions. 'He was to spend the evening at Mrs. Hammond's. I doubt if he will be back before midnight.'

'Then I must call another time,' Jack said practically.

'If I see him first, can I tell him anything for you?' the curate persisted. Who was this man? Could he be a detective? The idea was preposterous, yet it occurred to him.

But Jack was so far from being a detective that he had dismissed the suspicions he had at first entertained. 'I think not, thank you,' he answered. 'I will call again.'

'Can I give him any name?' Clode asked in the last resort.

'Well, you might say Jack Smith called,' the barrister answered, 'if you will be so kind.'

They parted at the door, and Clode went back into the house, where he speedily learned

all that Mrs. Baxter knew of Mr. Smith. It dispelled his first fear. The man was not a detective ; still it sent him home gloomy and ill at ease. What if so intimate a friend of the rector, as this Smith seemed to be, should tell him of his curate's visit to the cupboard, and the excuse which on the spur of the moment he had invented ? It might go ill with him then. What explanation could he give ? He tried to consider such a mishap impossible, or at all events unlikely ; but not with complete success. More than ever he wished that he had not meddled with the letters.

To return to Jack, whose presence was shedding gladness on the Bonamy household. Such mild festivities as the bazaar were not uncommon in Claversham, but the Bonamys had not been wont to look forward to them with anything approaching exhilaration. It is wonderful how children growing up in social shadow learn the fact. Daintry Bonamy,

scarcely less than her sister, had come to regard the annual flower-show, the school sports, and the regatta with distaste and repugnance, as occasions of little pleasure and much humiliation. It was Mr. Bonamy's will, however, that they should attend, though he never went himself; and times innumerable they had done so, outwardly in pretty dresses and becoming hats, inwardly in sackcloth and ashes.

Jack's presence changed all this, and for once the girls went up to dress quite gaily. If Kate reflected that Jack's intimacy with the rector would be likely to bring them also into contact with him, she said nothing; and from Jack—for the present at least—it was mercifully hidden that, with all his kindness, his unfailing good-humour, his wit, his devotion to her, his chief attraction in the girl's eyes lay in the fact that he was another man's friend.

When they entered the Assembly Room it was already well filled, the main concourse being about the two stalls at the end of the room over which the archdeacon's wife and Mrs. Hammond respectively ruled. Here the great people were mainly to be seen ; and an acute observer would soon have discovered that between those who habitually hung about this end and those who surrounded the four lower stalls there was a great gulf fixed. Those on the one side of this examined the dresses of those on the other with indulgent interest, and, for the most part, through double eyeglasses ; while those on the other hand either returned the compliment and made careful notes, or looked about deferentially for a glance of recognition. The man who should have bridged that gulf, who should have been equally at home with Mrs. Archdeacon and the hotel-keeper's wife, was the rector. But the rector had heard on his

entrance the unlucky word 'writ,' and he was in his most unpleasant humour. He felt that the whole room were talking of him—the majority with a narrow dislike, a few with sympathy. Was it unnatural that, forgetting his situation, he should throw in his lot with his friends, who were ever so much the pleasanter, the wittier, the more amusing, and present a smiling front of defiance to his opponents or those whom he thought to be such? At any rate, that was what he was doing; and no one could remark the carriage of his head or the direction of his eyes without feeling that there was something in the townsfolk's complaint that the new clergyman was above his work.

Jack and his party did not at once come across him. They found enough to amuse them at the lower end of the room—the more as to the barrister the great and the little with whom he rubbed shoulders were all one.

Strange to say, he did not discern any great difference even in their dress ! With Daintry hanging on his arm and Kate at his side, he was content, until, turning suddenly in the thick of the crowd to speak to the elder girl, he saw her face become crimson. At the same moment she bowed slightly to some one behind him. He looked round quickly, with a sharp jealous pang at his heart, to learn who had called forth this show of emotion. He found himself face to face with the rector.

Lindo had looked forward to this meeting. He had prepared himself for it. And yet, occurring in this way, it shook him out of his self-possession. He coloured almost as deeply as the girl had coloured, and though he held out his hand without any perceptible pause, the action was nervous and jerky. ‘ By Jove ! is it you, Jack ? ’ he said, his tone a mixture of old cordiality and rising antagonism. ‘ How

do you do, Miss Bonamy?’ and he held out his hand to the girl also, who just touched it with her fingers and drew back. ‘It is pleasant to see your cousin’s face again,’ he went on more glibly, yet clearly not at his ease. ‘I was sorry that I was not at home last night when he called.’

‘Yes, I was sorry to miss you,’ Jack answered slowly, his eyes on his friend’s face. He could not quite understand matters. His cousin’s embarrassment had been almost a revelation to him, and yet it flashed across his mind now that the cause of it might be only the quarrel between her father and the rector. The same thing would account for Lindo’s shy, ungenial manner. And yet—and yet he could not quite understand it, and, whether he would or no, his face grew hard. ‘You heard I had looked in?’ he continued.

‘Yes; Mrs. Baxter told me,’ Lindo answered, moving slightly to let some one pass

him ; then glancing aside to smile a recognition.

‘She looks the better for the change, I think.’

‘Yes ; she gets more fresh air now.’

‘It does not seem to have done you much good.’

‘No?’

Altogether it was rather pitiful. They were old, tried college friends, or had been so a few weeks back, and they had nothing more to say to one another than this ! The rector’s self-consciousness began to infect the other, sowing in his mind he knew not what suspicions. So that, if ever Daintry’s interposition was welcome, it was welcome now. ‘Jack is going to stay a week,’ she said inconsequently, standing on one leg the while, with her arm through Jack’s and her big eyes on the rector’s face.

‘I am very glad to hear it,’ Lindo answered.

‘He will find me at home more than once in the week, I hope.’

‘I shall come and try,’ said Jack stoutly.

‘Of course you will!’ the rector replied, with a flash of his old manner. ‘I shall be glad if you will remind him of his promise, Miss Bonamy.’

Kate murmured that she would.

‘You like your house?’ Jack said.

‘Oh, very much—very much indeed.’

‘It is an improvement on No. 383?’ continued the barrister, rather drily.

‘It is—very much so!’

The words were natural. They were the words Jack expected. But, unfortunately, Gregg at that moment passed the rector’s elbow, and the latter’s manner was cold and shy—almost as if he resented the reference to his old life. Jack thought he did, and his lip curled. Fortunately, Daintry again intervened. ‘Here is Miss Hammond,’

she said. 'She is looking for you, Mr. Lindo.'

The rector turned as Laura, threading her way through the press, came smiling towards him. She glanced with some curiosity at Jack, and then nodded graciously to Kate, whom she knew at the Sunday-school, and through meeting her on such occasions as this. 'How do you do, Miss Bonamy?' she said pleasantly. 'Will you pardon me if I carry off the rector? We want him to come to tea.'

Kate bowed, and the rector took off his hat to the girls. Then he waved an awkward farewell to Jack, muttered 'See you soon!' and went off with his captor.

And that was all! Jack turned away with his cousins to the nearest stall, and bought and chatted. But he did both at random. His thoughts were elsewhere. He was a keen observer, and he had seen too much for

comfort, yet not enough for comprehension. Nor did the occasional glance which he shot at Kate's preoccupied face, as she bent over the woolwork and 'guaranteed hand-paintings,' tend to clear up his doubts or render his mood more cheerful.

Meanwhile the rector's frame of mind, as he rejoined his party, was not a whit more enviable. He was angry with himself, angry with his friend. The sight of Jack standing by Kate's side had made his own conduct to the girl at their last interview appear in a worse light than before—more churlish, more ungrateful. He wished now—but morosely, not with any tenderness of regret—that he had sought some opportunity of saying a word of apology to her. And then Jack? He fancied he saw condemnation written on Jack's face, and that he too, to whom, in the old days, he had confided all his aspirations and resolves, was on the enemy's

side—was blaming him for being on bad terms with his churchwardens, and for having already come to blows with half his parish.

It was not pleasant. But the more unpleasant things he had to face, the higher he would hold his head. He disengaged himself presently—the Hammonds had already preceded him—from the throng and bustle of the heated room, and went down the stairs alone. Outside it was already dark, and small rain was falling in the dull streets. The outlook was wretched, and yet in his present mood he found a trifling satisfaction in the respect with which the crowd of ragamuffins about the door fell back to give him passage. With it all, he was some one. He was rector of the town.

At the Hammonds' door he found a carriage waiting in the rain. It was not one he knew, and as he placed his umbrella

in the stand he asked the servant whose it was.

‘It is Lord Dynmore’s, sir,’ the man answered, in his low trained voice. ‘His lordship is in the drawing room, sir.’

CHAPTER XVI

‘ LORD DYNMORE IS HERE ’

LORD DYNMORE had arrived a few minutes only before the rector found his carriage at the door. Naturally enough, when he trotted at the heels of the servant into Mrs. Hammond’s drawing-room, his entrance, unexpected as it was, caused a flutter among those assembled there. Lords are still lords in the country. Mrs. Hammond’s sensations on seeing him were wholly those of pleasure. She was pleased to see him. She was still more pleased that he had chosen to call at so opportune a moment, when his light would not be hidden, and James had on his best waistcoat. And so she rose to meet him

with a beaming smile, and a cordiality only chastened by the knowledge that Mrs. Homfray and the archdeacon's wife were observing her with critical jealousy. 'Why, Lord Dynmore,' she exclaimed, 'this is most kind of you!'

'How d'ye do? how d'ye do?' said the peer as he advanced. He was a slight, short man with bushy grey whiskers and grizzled hair which, being rather long, strayed over the fur collar of his overcoat. A noble aquiline nose and keen eyes helped to give him, despite his short stature, an air of dignity. 'How d'ye do? Why,' he continued, looking round, 'you are quite *en fête* here.'

'We have been at a bazaar, Lord Dynmore,' Laura answered. She was rather a favourite with him and could 'say things.' 'I think you ought to have been there too, to patronise it. We did not know that you

were in the country, but we sent you a card.’

‘Never heard a word of it!’ his lordship replied positively.

‘But you must have had the card,’ persisted Laura.

‘Never heard a word of it!’ his lordship repeated. He had by this time shaken hands with everyone in the room. When the company was not too large he made a rule of doing this, thereby obviating the ill results of a bad memory, and earning considerable popularity. ‘Archdeacon, you are looking very well,’ he continued.

‘I think I may say the same of you,’ answered the clerical dignitary. ‘You have had good sport?’

‘Capital! capital!’ replied the peer in his jerky way. ‘But it won’t last my time! In two years there will not be a head of buffalo in the States! By the way, I saw your nephew.’

‘My nephew!’ echoed the archdeacon.

‘Yes. Had him up to dinner in Kansas city. A good fellow—a very good fellow. He put me up to one or two things worth knowing.’

‘But, Lord Dynmore, you must be thinking of someone else!’ replied the archdeacon in a fretful tone. ‘It could not be my nephew: I have not a nephew out there.’

‘No?’ replied the earl. ‘Then it must have been the dean’s. Or perhaps it was old Canon Frampton’s—I am not sure now. But he was a good fellow, an excellent fellow!’ And my lord looked round and wagged his head knowingly.

The archdeacon’s niece, a young lady who had not seen the peer before, nor indeed any peers, and who consequently was busily making a study of him, looked surprised. Not so the others. They knew him and his ways. It was popularly believed that Lord Dynmore

could keep two things, and two only, in his mind—the head of game he had killed in each and every year since he first carried a gun ; and the amount of his annual income from the time of the property coming to him.

‘ There have been changes in the parish since you were here last,’ said Mrs. Hammond, deftly intervening. She saw that the arch-deacon looked a little put out. ‘ Poor Mr. Williams is gone.’

‘ Ah ! to be sure ! to be sure !’ replied the earl. ‘ Poor old chap. He was a friend of my father’s, and now you have a friend of mine in his place. From generation to generation, you know. I remember now,’ he continued, tugging at his whiskers peevishly, ‘ that I meant to see Lindo before I called here. I must look him up by-and-by.’

‘ I hope he will save you the trouble,’ Mrs. Hammond answered. ‘ I am expecting him every minute.’

‘Capital! capital! He is a good fellow now, isn’t he? A really good fellow! I am sure you ought to be much obliged to me for sending you such a cheery soul, Mrs. Hammond. And he is not so very old,’ the earl added, looking round him waggishly. ‘Not too old, you know, Miss Hammond. Young for his years, at any rate.’

Laura laughed and coloured a little—what would offend in a commoner is in a peer pure drollery. And, as it happened, at this moment the rector came in. The news of the earl’s presence had kindled a spark of elation in his eye. He had not waited for the servant to announce him; and as he stood a second at the door closing it, he confronted the company, which he knew included his patron, with an air of modest dignity which more than one remarked. His glance rested momentarily upon the figure of the earl, who was the only stranger in the room,

and whom consequently he had no difficulty in identifying; and he seemed to hesitate whether he should address him. On second thoughts, however, he decided not to do so, and advanced to Mrs. Hammond. ‘I am afraid I scarcely deserve any tea,’ he said pleasantly, ‘I am so late.’

Laura, who had risen, touched his arm. ‘Lord Dynmore is here,’ she said in a low voice, which was nevertheless distinctly heard by all. ‘I do not think you have seen him.’

He took it as an informal introduction, and turned to Lord Dynmore, who was leaning against the fireplace, toying with his teacup and talking to Mrs. Homfray. The young clergyman advanced a step and held out his hand, a slight flush on his cheek. ‘There is no one whom I ought to be better pleased to see than yourself, Lord Dynmore,’ he said with feeling. ‘I have been looking forward for some time to this meeting.’

‘Ah, to be sure,’ the peer replied, holding out his hand readily, though he looked surprised, and was secretly completely mystified by the other’s earnestness. ‘I am pleased to meet you, I am sure. Greatly pleased.’

The listeners, who had heard what he had just said about his old friend the rector, stared. Only the person to whom the words were addressed saw nothing odd in them. ‘You have not long returned to England, I think?’ he observed.

‘No; came back last Saturday night. And how is the rector? Where is he? Why does he not show up? I understood Mrs. Hammond to say he was coming.’

The archdeacon, Mrs. Hammond, all in the room were dumb with astonishment. Even Lindo was surprised, thinking it very dull in the earl not to guess at once that he was the new incumbent. No one answered, and the peer, glancing sharply round, dis-

cerned that something was wrong—that, in fact, everyone was at a loss. ‘Eh! Oh, I see,’ he resumed in a different tone. ‘You are not one of his curates? I made a mistake, I suppose. Took you for one of his curates, do you see? That was all. Beg your pardon. Beg your pardon, I am sure. But where is he?’

‘This *is* the rector, Lord Dynmore,’ the archdeacon said in an uncertain, puzzled way.

‘No, no, no, no,’ replied the great man fretfully. ‘I mean the old rector—my old friend.’

‘He has forgotten that poor Mr. Williams is dead,’ Laura murmured to her mother, amid a general pause of astonishment.

He overheard her. ‘Nothing of the kind, young lady!’ he answered irritably. ‘Nothing of the kind. Bless my soul, do you think I do not know whom I present to my own livings? My memory is not so bad as that!’

I thought this gentleman was Lindo's curate, that was all. That was all.'

They stared at one another in awkward silence. The rector was the first to speak. 'I am afraid we are somehow at cross purposes still, Lord Dynmore,' he stammered, his manner stiff and constrained. 'I am not my own curate because, if I may say so, I am myself—Reginald Lindo, whom you were kind enough to present to this living.'

'To Claversham, do you mean?'

'Yes.'

'And do you say you are Reginald Lindo?' The peer straightened himself and grew very red in the face as he put the question.

'Yes, certainly I am.'

'Then, sir, I say that certainly you are not!' was the startling answer. 'Certainly you are not! You are no more Reginald Lindo than I am!' the peer repeated, striking his hand upon the table by his side, and seem-

ing to swell with rage. ‘What do you mean by saying that you are, eh? What do you mean by it?’

‘Lord Dynmore——’

But Lord Dynmore would not listen. ‘Who are you, sir? Answer me that question first!’ he cried. He was a choleric man, and he saw by this time that there was something seriously amiss; so that the shocked, astonished faces round him tended rather to increase than lessen his wrath. ‘Answer me that!’

‘I think, Lord Dynmore, that you must be mad,’ the rector replied, his lips quivering. ‘I am as certainly Reginald Lindo as you are Lord Dynmore!’

‘But what are you doing here?’ the other retorted, raising his hand, and storming down the interruption which the archdeacon would have effected. ‘That is what I want to know. Who made you rector of Claversham?’

‘The bishop, my lord,’ answered the young man sternly.

‘Ay, but on whose presentation?’

‘On yours.’

‘On mine?’

‘Most assuredly,’ replied the clergyman doggedly—‘as the archdeacon here, who inducted me, can bear witness.’

‘It is false!’ Lord Dynmore almost screamed. He turned to the panic-stricken listeners, who had instinctively grouped themselves round the two, and appealed to them. ‘I presented a man nearly thrice his age, do you hear!—a man of sixty. Do you understand that? As for this—this Reginald Lindo, I never heard of him in my life! Never! If he had letters of presentation, I did not give them to him. That is all I can say!’

The young clergyman’s eyes flashed, and his face grew hard as a stone. He guessed already the misfortune which had happened

to him, and his heart was sore, as well as full of wrath. But in his pride he betrayed only the anger. ‘Lord Dynmore,’ he said fiercely, ‘you will have to answer for these insinuations. If there has been any error, the fault has not lain with me!’

‘Any error! Any error! An error, you call it, do you? Let me——’

‘Oh, Lord Dynmore!’ Mrs. Hammond gasped.

‘One moment, Lord Dynmore, if you please.’ This came from the archdeacon; and, though the other would have repulsed him, he persisted, placing himself between the two men, and almost laying his hands on the excited peer. ‘If there has been a mistake,’ he urged, ‘a few words will make it clear. I fully believe—nay, I feel sure, that my friend here is not in fault, whoever is.’

‘Ask your questions,’ grunted my lord, breathing hard, and eyeing the young clergy-

man as a terrier eyes the taller dog it means to attack. 'He will not answer them, trust me !'

'I think he will,' replied the archdeacon with decision. His *esprit de corps* was rising. The earl's rude insistence disgusted him. He noticed, his eyes wandering for a moment while he considered how he should frame his question, that another person, Mr. Clode, had silently entered the room, and was listening with a darkly thoughtful face. It occurred then to the archdeacon to suggest that the ladies should withdraw ; but then again it seemed fair that, as they had heard the charges, they should hear what answer the rector had to make ; and he proceeded. 'First, Lord Dynmore,' he said gravely, 'I must ask you whom you intended to present.'

'My old friend, Reginald Lindo, of course.'

'His address, if you please,' the archdeacon continued rather curtly.

‘Somewhere in the East End of London,’ the earl answered. ‘Oh, I remember now, St. Gabriel’s, Aldgate.’

The archdeacon turned silently to the clergyman. ‘He was my uncle,’ Lindo explained gravely. ‘He died a year ago last October.’

‘Died!’ The exclamation was Lord Dynmore’s.

‘Yes, died,’ the young man retorted bitterly. ‘Your lordship keeps a watchful eye upon your friends, it seems!’

The shaft went home. The earl caught a quick breath, and his face fell. The words awoke a slumbering chord in his memory, and recalled—not as might have been expected, old days of frolic and sport spent with the friend whose death was thus coldly flung in his face—but a scene in another world. He saw in fancy a rock-bound valley, enclosed by hills which rose in giant steps to the snowy

line of the Andes; and in its depths a tiny hunter's camp. He saw an Indian fishing in the brook, and near him a white man wandering away—a letter in his hand. Then he remembered a shot, an alarm, a hasty striking of the tent, and for many hours, even days, a rapid, dangerous march. In the excitement the letter had been forgotten, to be recalled with its tidings—here, and now.

He winced, and muttered, ‘By heavens, and I *had* heard it!’

The clergyman caught the words, and his resentment waxed hot. ‘My uncle’s death,’ he resumed grimly, in the tone of one rather making than answering an accusation, ‘occurred a year before the presentation was offered to me by your solicitors!’

‘Lord help us!’ said the peer in a helpless, bewildered tone. ‘You are a clergyman, sir, I suppose?’

‘ That is a fresh insult, Lord Dynmore ! ’
Lindo replied warmly.

‘ Hoity-toity ! ’ my lord retorted, recovering himself quickly, ‘ you are a fine man to talk of insults ! And you in my living without a shadow of title to it ! You must have had some suspicion, sir, some idea that all was not right.’

‘ I think I can answer for Mr. Lindo, there ! ’ interposed the curate, stepping forward for the first time. His face was deeply flushed, and he spoke hurriedly, without looking up ; perhaps, because all eyes were on him. ‘ When Mr. Lindo came here, I expected, for certain reasons, an older man. I heard by chance from him—I think it was on the evening of his arrival—that he had not long lost an uncle of the same name, and it occurred to me then as just possible that there might have been a mistake. But I particularly observed that he was perfectly free from any suspicion of that kind himself.’

‘Pooh! There is nothing in that!’ the archdeacon replied snappishly.

‘On the contrary, I think there is a great deal in it!’ cried the earl in a voice of triumph.

‘A great deal in it. If the idea occurred to a stranger, is it possible that the incumbent’s own mind could be free from it? Is it possible, I say?’

‘Is it possible,’ the rector answered viciously, a ring as of steel in his voice, ‘that a man who had his dear friend’s death announced to him could forget the news in a year, and think of him as still alive?’

The earl gasped with passion. Never before had anyone addressed him in that way. By a tremendous effort he refrained from using bad words; he even forebore, in view of the alarmed looks of the ladies and the archdeacon’s hasty expostulation, to call his opponent a villain or a scoundrel. He only

stammered, ‘ You—you—are you going to give up my living? ’

‘ No,’ was the answer.

‘ You are not? ’

‘ Certainly I am not ! ’ the rector repeated. ‘ If you had treated me differently, Lord Dynmore,’ he continued, speaking with his arms crossed and his lips set tight in contempt and defiance, ‘ my answer might have been different ! Now, though the mistake has lain with yourself or your people, you have accused me of fraud ! You have treated me as an impostor ! You have dared to ask me, though I have been ministering to the people in this parish for months, whether I am a clergyman ! You have insulted me grossly, and, so doing, have put it out of my power to resign had I been so minded ! And you may be sure I shall not resign.’

He looked a very hero as he flung down his defiance. But the earl cared

nothing for his looks. 'You will not?' he stuttered.

'No! I acknowledge no authority whatever in you,' was the answer. 'You are *functus officio*. I am subject to the bishop, and to him only.'

'Give me my hat,' the peer mumbled, turning abruptly away; and, tugging up the collar of his coat, he began to grope about in a manner which at another time would have been laughable. 'Give me my hat, some one,' he repeated. 'Let me get out before I swear. I am *functus officio*, am I? I have never been so insulted in my life! Never, so help me heaven! Never! Let me get out! *Functus officio*, am I!'

They made way for him in a kind of panic, and his murmurs died away in the hall, Mr. Clode with much presence of mind opening the door for him and letting him out. When he was gone, in the room he had left

there was absolute silence. The men avoided one another's eyes. The women, their lips parted, looked each at her neighbour. Mrs. Homfray, the young wife of an old husband, was the first to speak. ‘ Well, I never ! ’ she murmured. ‘ What an old bear ! ’

That broke the spell. The rector, who had stood gazing darkly, with flushed brow and compressed lips, at the hearthrug, roused himself. ‘ I think I had better go,’ he said, his tone cold and ungracious. ‘ You will excuse me, I am sure, Mrs. Hammond. Good-night. Good-night.’

The archdeacon took a step forward, with the intention of intercepting him ; but thought better of it, and stopped, seeing that the time was not propitious. So, save to murmur an answer to his general farewell, no one spoke ; and Lindo left the room under the impression, though he himself had set the tone, that he stood alone among them ; that he had not

their sympathies. He carried away this feeling with him, and it added to his unhappiness, and to the pride with which he endured it. But at the moment he was scarcely aware of the impression. The blow had fallen so swiftly, it was so unexpected and so crushing, that he went out into the darkness stunned and bewildered, conscious only, as are men whom some sudden accident has befallen, that in a moment all was changed with him.

An hour later Mrs. Hammond and her daughter alone remained. The last of the visitors had departed, the dinner hour was long past ; but they still sat on, fascinated by the topic, reproducing for one another's benefit the extraordinary scene they had witnessed, and discussing its probable consequences. 'I am sure, absolutely sure, poor fellow, that he knew nothing about it,' Mrs. Hammond declared for the twentieth time.

‘ So the archdeacon seemed to think, mamma,’ Laura answered. ‘ And yet he said that probably Mr. Lindo would have to go.’

‘ Because of the miserable attacks these people have made upon him ! ’ Mrs. Hammond rejoined with indignation. ‘ But think of the pity of it ! Think of the income ! And such a house as it is ! ’

‘ It *is* a nice house,’ Laura assented, gazing thoughtfully into the fire, a slight access of colour in her cheeks.

‘ I think it is abominable ! ’

‘ Besides,’ Laura said, continuing her chain of reflection, ‘ there is the view from the drawing-room windows.’

‘ Of course, it is too bad ! It is really too bad ! I declare I am quite upset, I am so sorry for him. Lord Dynmore ought to be ashamed of himself ! ’

‘ Yes,’ Laura assented rather absently, ‘ I quite agree with you, mamma. And as for

the hall, with a Persian rug or two it would be quite as good as an extra room.'

'What hall? Oh, at the rectory?'

'Yes.'

Mrs. Hammond rose with a quick, pettish air of annoyance. 'Upon my word, Laura,' she exclaimed, drawing a little shawl about her comfortable shoulders, 'you seem to think more of the house than of the poor fellow himself! Let us go to dinner. It is half-past eight, and after.'

CHAPTER XVII

THE LAWYER AT HOME

IF Mr. Clode, when he stepped forward to open the door for Lord Dynmore, had any thought beyond that of facilitating his departure—if, for instance, he anticipated having a private word with the peer—he was disappointed. Lord Dynmore, after what had happened, was in no mood for conversation. As, still muttering and mumbling, he seized his hat from the hall table, he did indeed notice his companion, but it was with the red and angry glare of a bull about to charge. The next moment he plunged headlong into his brougham, and roared ‘Home!’

His servants knew his ways, and the car-

riage bounded away into the darkness of the drive, as if it would reach the Park at a leap. But it had barely cleared Mrs. Hammond's gates, and was still rattling over the stony pavement of the Top of the Town, when the footman heard his master lower the window and shout 'Stop!' The horses were pulled up as suddenly as they had been started, and the man got down and went to the door. 'Do you know where Mr. Bonamy the lawyer's offices are?' Lord Dynmore asked curtly.

'Yes, my lord.'

'Then drive there!'

The footman climbed to the box again. 'What has bitten him now, I wonder?' he grumbled to his companion as he passed on the order. 'He is in a fine tantrum in there!'

'Who cares?' retorted the coachman, with a coachman's fine independence. 'If

old Bonamy is in, there will be a pair of them !’

And Mr. Bonamy was in. In that particular Lord Dynmore had better luck than he perhaps deserved. Late as it was for business—it was after seven—the gas was still burning in the lawyer’s offices, illuminating the fanlight over the door and the windows of one of the rooms on the ground floor—the right-hand room. The servant jumped down and rapped, and his summons was answered almost immediately by Mr. Bonamy himself, who jerked open the door, and stood holding it ajar, with the air of a man interrupted in the middle of his work, and bent on sending the intruder off with a flea in his ear. Catching sight of the earl’s carriage, however, and the servant murmuring that my lord wished to see him on business, the lawyer stepped forward, his expression changing to one of surprise.

The Dynmore business had been always transacted in London. In cases where a country agent became necessary the London solicitors had invariably employed a firm in Birmingham. Neither Mr. Bonamy nor the other Claversham lawyer had ever risen to the dignity of being concerned for Lord Dynmore, nor could Mr. Bonamy recall any occasion in the past on which the great man had crossed the threshold of his office.

His appearance now, therefore, was almost as welcome as it was unexpected. Yet from some cause, perhaps the lateness of the hour, though that would seem to be improbable, there was a visible embarrassment in the lawyer's manner as he recognised him ; and Mr. Bonamy only stepped aside to make way for him to enter upon hearing from his own lips that he desired to speak with him.

Then he opened the door of the room on the left of the hall. 'If your lordship will

take a seat here,' he said, 'I will be with you in a moment.'

The room was in darkness, but he struck a match and lit the gas, placing a chair for Lord Dynmore, who, fretting and fuming and more than half inclined to walk out again, said sharply that he had only a minute to spare.

'I shall not be a minute, my lord,' the lawyer answered. And he retired at once, closing the door behind him, and went, as his visitor could hear, into the opposite room. Lord Dynmore looked round impatiently. He had not so high an opinion of his own importance as have some who are not peers. But he was choleric and accustomed to have his own way, and he thought that at least this local man whom he was going to patronise might receive him with more respect.

Mr. Bonamy, however, was as good as his word. In less than a minute he was back.

Closing the door carefully behind him, he sat down at the table. 'I am entirely at your lordship's service now,' he said, bowing slightly.

The earl laid his hat on the table. 'Very well,' he answered abruptly. 'I have heard that you are a sharp fellow, Mr. Bonamy, and a good lawyer, and that is why I have come to you—that and the fact that my business will not wait and I have a mind to punish those confounded London people who have let me into this mess!'

That it was rather impatience than anything else which had brought him he betrayed by getting up and striding across the room. Meanwhile the lawyer, golden visions of bulky settlements and interminable leases floating before his eyes, murmured his anxiety to be of service, and waited to hear more.

'It is about that confounded sneak of a rector of yours!' my lord exclaimed, coming at last to a stand before the table.

Mr. Bonamy started, his visions fading rapidly away. ‘Our rector?’ he replied, gazing at his client in great astonishment. ‘Mr. Lindo, my lord?’

‘The man who calls himself your rector!’ the earl growled. ‘He is no more a rector than I am, and pretty fools you were to be taken in by him!’

‘Now that is odd!’ the lawyer answered. He spoke absently, his eyes resting on the peer’s face as if his thoughts had strayed far away.

‘Odd or not,’ Lord Dynmore replied, stamping on the floor with undiminished irritation, ‘it is the fact, sir! It is the fact! And now if you will listen to me I will tell you what I want you to do.’

The lawyer bowed again, and the earl proceeded to tell his tale. Passing lightly over his own forgetfulness and negligence, he laid stress on all the facts which seemed to show

that Lindo could not have accepted the living in good faith. He certainly made out a plausible case, but his animus in telling it was so apparent that, when he had finished and wound up by announcing his firm resolve to eject the young man from his cure, Mr. Bonamy only shook his head with a doubtful smile. 'You will have to prove guilty knowledge on his part, my lord,' he said gravely.

'So I will!' cried the earl roundly.

Mr. Bonamy seemed inclined to shake his head again, but he thought better of it. 'Well, you may be right, my lord,' he answered. 'At any rate—without going further into the matter at this moment, or considering what course your lordship could or should adopt—I think I can do one thing. I can lay some information on this point before you at once.'

'What! To show that he knew?' cried the earl, leaning forward eagerly.

‘Yes, I think so. But as to its weight——’

‘What is it? What is it? Let me hear it!’ was the impatient interruption. The earl was on his feet in a moment. ‘Why, gad-zooks, we may have him in a corner before the day is out, Mr. Bonamy,’ he continued. ‘True? I will be bound it is true!’

Mr. Bonamy looked as if he very much doubted that; but he offered no further opposition. Begging Lord Dynmore, who could not disguise his admiration, so much was he struck with this strange preparedness—to excuse him for a moment, he left the room. He returned almost immediately, however, followed by a man whom the earl at once recognised, and recognised with the utmost astonishment. ‘Why, you confounded rascal!’ he gasped, jumping up again, and staring with all his eyes. ‘What are you doing here?’

It was Felton. Yet not the same Felton whose surreptitious visit to the rectory had

been cut short by Mr. Clode. A few weeks of idleness and drinking a month or two at the 'Bull and Staff' had much changed the once-sleek and respectable servant. Had he gone to the rectory for help now, his tale would not have passed muster even for a moment. His coat had come to hang loosely about him, and he wore no tie. His hands were dirty and tremulous, his eyes shifty and bloodshot. His pasty face had grown puffy and was stained with blotches which it was impossible to misinterpret. He had gone down the hill fast.

Seeing his old master before him he began to whimper; but the lawyer cut him short. 'This man, who says he was formerly your servant, has come to me with a strange story, Lord Dynmore,' he began.

'Ten to one it's a lie!' replied the peer, scowling darkly at the poor wretch.

'So I think likely!' Mr. Bonamy rejoined with a cough and the utmost dryness. 'How-

ever, what he says is this : that when he landed in England without a character he considered what he should do ; and, remembering that he had heard you say that Mr. Lindo the elder, whom he knew, had been appointed to this living, he came down here to see what he could get out of him.'

'That is likely enough !' cried the peer scornfully.

'When he called at the rectory, however, he found Mr. Lindo the younger in possession. He had an interview with him, and he states that Mr. Lindo, to purchase his silence, as he supposes, undertook to pay him ten shillings a week until your return.'

'Phew !' my lord whistled in astonishment.

The servant mistook his surprise for incredulity. 'He did, my lord !' he cried passionately. 'It is heaven's own truth I am telling. I can bring half a dozen witnesses to prove it.'

‘You can?’

‘I can, my lord.’

‘Yes, but to prove what?’ said the lawyer sharply.

‘That he paid me ten shillings a week down to last week, my lord.’

‘That will do! That will do!’ cried the earl in great glee. ‘Set a thief to catch a thief—that is the plan!’

Mr. Bonamy looked displeased. ‘Pardon me, but are you not a little premature?’ he said with some sourness.

‘Premature? How?’

‘At present you have only this man’s word for what is on the face of it a very improbable story.’

‘Improbable?’ replied the peer quickly, but with less heat. ‘I do not see it. He says that he has witnesses to prove that this fellow paid him the money. If that be so, explain the payment if you can. And, mark you,

Mr. Bonamy, the allowance stopped last week —on my arrival, don't you see?'

The man cried eagerly that that was so. But the earl at once bade him be silent for the confounded rascal he was. Mr. Bonamy stood rubbing his chin thoughtfully and looking on the floor, but said nothing; so that the great man presently lost patience. 'Don't you agree with me, sir?' he cried irascibly.

'I think we had better get rid of our friend here before we discuss the matter, my lord,' the lawyer answered bluntly. 'Do you hear, Felton?' he continued, turning to the servant. 'You may go now. Come to me to-morrow morning at ten o'clock, and I will tell you what Lord Dynmore proposes to do in your matter.'

The ex-valet would have demurred to being thus set aside; but the earl roaring 'Go, you scoundrel!' in a voice he had been accustomed to obey, and Mr. Bonamy opening

the door for him, he submitted and went. The streets were wet and gloomy, and he was more sober than he had been for a week. In other words, his nerves were shaky, and he soon began, as he lounged homewards, to torment himself with doubts. Had he made the best of his story? Had he been wise to go to the lawyer at all? Might it not have been safer to make a last appeal to the rector? Above all, would Mr. Clode, whose game he did not understand, hold his hand, or play the trump-card by disclosing that little attempt at burglary? Altogether Felton was not happy, and saw before him but one resource—to get home as quickly as possible and get drunk.

Meanwhile the lawyer, left alone with his client, seemed as much averse as before to speaking out. Lord Dynmore had again to take the initiative. 'Well, it is good enough, sir, is it not?' he said, frowning impatiently on

his new adviser. 'There is a clear case, I suppose!'

'I think your lordship had better hear first,' Mr. Bonamy answered, 'how your late servant came to bring his story to me.' And then he proceeded to explain the course which the young clergyman had pursued in the parish from the first, and the opposition and ill-will it had provoked. He told the story from his own point of view, but with more fairness than might have been expected: though naturally, when he came to the matter of the sheep-grazing and the writ, he took care to make his own case good. The earl listened and chuckled, and at last interrupted him.

'So you have been at him already?' he said, grinning. 'He is no friend of yours?'

'No,' the lawyer answered slowly 'I may say, indeed, that I have been in constant opposition to him from the time of his induc-

tion. Felton (the man who has just left us) knew that, and it led him to bring his tale to me this evening.'

'When he could get no more money out of the parson!' the earl replied with a sneer. 'But, now, what is to be done, Mr. Bonamy?'

Mr. Bonamy did not at once answer. Instead, he stood looking down, his face perturbed. His doubt and uneasiness, in fact, visibly increased as the seconds flew by, and still Lord Dynmore's gaze, bent on him at first in impatience and later in surprise, seemed to be striving to probe his thoughts. He looked down at the table and frowned as if displeased by the scrutiny. When at last he spoke, his voice was harsher than usual. 'I do not think, my lord,' he said, 'that I can answer that question.'

'Do you want to take counsel's opinion, then?'

'No, my lord,' Mr. Bonamy answered

curtly. 'I mean something different. I do not think, to put it plainly, that I can act for your lordship in this matter.'

'Cannot act for me?' the earl gasped.

'I am afraid not,' Mr. Bonamy answered doggedly, a slight flush as of shame on his sallow cheek. 'I have explained, my lord, that I have been constantly opposed to this young man, but my opposition has been of a public nature and—and upon principle. I have no doubt that he and others consider me his chief enemy in the place. To that I have no objection. But I am unwilling that he or others should think that private interest has had any part in my opposition, and therefore, being churchwarden, I would prefer, even at the risk of offending your lordship, to decline undertaking the business.'

'But why? Why?' cried the earl, between anger and astonishment.

'I have tried to explain,' Mr. Bonamy re-

joined with firmness. 'I am afraid I cannot make my reasons clearer.'

The earl swore softly and took up his hat. He really was at a loss to understand; principally because, knowing that Mr. Bonamy had risen from the ranks, he did not credit him with any fineness of feeling. He had heard only that he was a clever and rather sharp practitioner, and a man who might be trusted to make things unpleasant for the other side. He took up his hat and swore softly. 'You are aware,' he said, turning at the door and looking daggers at the solicitor, 'that by taking this course you are throwing away a share of my work?'

Mr. Bonamy, wearing a rather more gaunt and grim air than usual, simply bowed.

'You will act for the other side, I suppose?' my lord snarled.

'I shall not act professionally for anyone, my lord!'

‘Then you are a damned quixotic fool—that is all I have to say!’ was the earl’s parting shot. And, having fired it, he flung out of the room and in great amaze roared for his carriage.

A man is seldom so much inclined—on the surface, at any rate—to impute low motives to others as when he has just done something which he suspects to be foolish and quixotic. When Mr. Bonamy, a few minutes later, entered his rarely used drawing-room, and discovered Jack and the two girls playing at Patience, he was in his most cynical mood. He stood for a moment on the hearthrug, his coat-tails on his arms, and presently he said to Jack, ‘I am surprised to see you here.’

Jack looked up. The girls looked up also. ‘I wonder you are not at the rectory,’ Mr. Bonamy continued ironically, ‘advising your friend how to keep out of gaol!’

‘What on earth do you mean, sir?’ Jack exclaimed, laying down his cards and rising from the table. He saw that the lawyer had some news and was anxious to tell it.

‘I mean that he is in very considerable danger of going there!’ was Mr. Bonamy’s quiet answer. ‘There has been a scene at Mrs. Hammond’s this afternoon. By this time the story should be all over the town. Lord Dynmore turned up there and met him—denounced him as an impostor, and swore he had never presented him to the living.’

For a brief moment no one spoke. Then Daintry found her voice. ‘My goody!’ she exclaimed, her eyes like saucers. ‘Who told you, father?’

‘Never you mind, young lady!’ Mr. Bonamy retorted with good-humoured sharpness. ‘It is true! What is more, I am informed that Lord Dynmore has evidence that Mr. Lindo has been paying a man, who was

aware of this, a certain sum every week to keep his mouth shut.'

'My goody!' cried Daintry again. 'I wonder, now, what he paid him! What do you think, Jack?' And she turned to Jack to learn what he was doing that he did not speak.

Poor Jack! Why did he not speak, indeed? Why did he stand silent, gazing hard into the fire? Because he resented his friend's coldness? Because he would not defend him? Because he thought him guilty? No, but because in the first moment of Mr Bonamy's disclosure he had looked into Kate's face—his cousin's face, who the moment before had been laughing over the cards at his side—and with the keen insight, the painful sympathy which love imparts, he had read in it her secret. Poor Kate! No one else had seen her face fall or discovered her sudden embarrassment. A few seconds later she had

regained her ordinary calm composure, even the blood had gone back to her heart. But Jack had seen and read aright. He knew, and she knew that he knew. When at last—but not before Mr. Bonamy's attention had been drawn to his silence—he turned and spoke, she avoided his eyes. 'That is rather a wild tale, sir, is it not?' he said with an effort, and a pale smile.

If Mr. Bonamy had not been a man of great shrewdness, he would have been tempted to think that Jack had been in the secret all the time. As it was, he only answered, 'I have reason to think that there is something in it, wild as it sounds. At any rate, the man in question has himself told the story to Lord Dynmore.'

'The pensioner?'

'Precisely.'

'Well, I should like to ask him a few questions,' Jack answered drearily. But for

the chill feeling at his heart, but for the knowledge he had just gained, he would have treated the matter very differently. He would have thought of his friend only—of his feelings, his possible misery. He would not have condescended in this first moment to the evidence. But now he could not feel for his friend. He could not even pity him. He needed all his pity for himself.

‘I do not answer for the story,’ Mr. Bonamy continued, little guessing, shrewd as he was, what was happening round him. ‘But there is no doubt of one thing—that Mr. Lindo was appointed in error, whether he was aware of the mistake or not. I do not know,’ the lawyer added thoughtfully, ‘that I shall pity him greatly. He has been very mischievous here. And he has held his head very high.’

‘He is the more likely to suffer now,’ Jack answered almost cynically.

‘Possibly,’ the lawyer replied. Then he added, ‘Daintry, fetch me my slippers, there is a good girl. Or, stay. Get me a candle and take them to my room.’

He went out after her, leaving the cousins alone. Neither spoke. Jack stood near the corner of the mantelshelf, gazing rigidly, almost sullenly, into the fire. What was Lindo to him? Why should he be sorry for him? A far worse thing had befallen himself. He tried to harden his heart, and to resolve that nothing of his suffering should be visible even to her.

But he had scarcely formed the resolution when his eyes wandered, despite his will, to the pale set face on the other side of the hearth. Suddenly he sprang forward and, almost kneeling, took her hand in both his own. ‘Kate,’ he whispered, ‘is it so? Is there no hope for me, then?’

She, too, had been looking into the fire.

She could feel for him now. She no longer thought his attentions 'nonsense' as at the station a while back. But she could not speak. She could only shake her head, the tears in her eyes.

Jack waited a moment. Then he laid down the hand and rose and went back to the fire, and stood looking into it sorrowfully; but his thoughts were no longer wholly of himself. He was a typical gentleman, though he was neither six feet high nor an Adonis. He had scarcely felt the weight of the blow which had fallen on himself, before he began to think what he could do to help her. Presently he put his thought into words. 'Kate,' he said, looking up, and speaking in a voice scarcely above a whisper, 'can I do anything?'

She made no attempt to deny the inference he had drawn. She seemed content, indeed, that he should possess her secret,

though the knowledge of it by another would have covered her with shame. But at the sound of his question she only shook her head with a sorrowful smile.

It was all dark to him. He knew nothing of the past—only that the faint suspicion he had felt at the bazaar was justified, and that Kate had given away her heart. He did not dare to ask whether there was any understanding between her and his friend ; and, not knowing that, what could he do? Nothing, it seemed to him at first.

Then a truly noble thought came into his head. ‘I am afraid,’ he said slowly, looking at his watch, ‘that Lindo is in trouble. I think I will go to him. It is not ten o’clock.’

He tried not to look at her as he spoke, but all the same he saw the crimson tide rise slowly over cheek and brow—over the face which his prayer had left so pure and pale.

Her lip trembled and she rose hurriedly, muttering something inaudible. Poor Jack!

For a moment self got the upper hand again, and he stood still, frowning. Then he said gallantly, ‘Yes, I think I will go. Will you let my uncle know in case I should be late?’

He did not look at her again, but hurried out of the room. It was a stiff, formal room, we know—a set, comfortless, middle-class room, which had given the rector quite a shock on his first introduction to it. But if it had united all the grace of the halls of Abencerrages to the stately comfort of a sixteenth-century dining-hall it would have been no more than worthy of the man who quitted it.

CHAPTER XVIII

A FRIEND IN NEED

I HAVE heard that the bitterest pang a boy feels on returning to school after his first holidays is reserved for the moment when he opens his desk and recalls the happy hour, full of joyous anticipation, when he closed that desk with a bang. Oh, the pity of it! The change from that boy to this, from that morning to this evening! How meanly, how inadequately—so it seems to the urchin standing with swelling breast before the well-remembered grammar—did the lad who turned the key estimate his real happiness! How little did he enter into it or deserve it!

Just such a pang shot through the young

rector's heart as he passed into the rectory porch after that scene at Mrs. Hammond's. His rage had had time to die down. With reflection had come a full sense of his position. As he entered the house he remembered—remembered only too well, grinding his teeth over the recollection—how secure, how free from embarrassments, how happy had been his situation when he last issued from that door a few, a very few, hours before. Such troubles as had then annoyed him seemed trifles light as air now. Mr. Bonamy's writ, the dislike of one section in the parish—how could he have let such things as these make him miserable for a moment?

How, indeed? Or, if there were anything grave in his situation then, what was it now? He had held his head high; henceforward he would be a byword in the parish, a man under a cloud. The position in which he had

placed himself would still be his, but only because he would cling to it to the last. Under no circumstances could it any longer be a source of pride to him. He had posed, involuntarily, as the earl's friend ; he must submit in the future to be laughed at by the Greggs and avoided by the Homfrays. It seemed to him indeed that his future in Claversham could be only one long series of humiliations. He was a proud man, and as he thought of this he sprang from his chair and strode up and down the room, his cheeks flaming. Had there ever been such a fall before !

Mrs. Baxter, as yet ignorant of the news, though it was by this time spreading through the town, brought him his dinner, and he ate something in the dining-room. Then he went back to the study and sat idle and listless before his writing-table. There was a number of 'Punch' lying on it, and he took this up

and read it through drearily, extracting a faint pleasure from its witticisms, but never for an instant forgetting the cloud of trouble brooding over him. Years afterwards he could recall some of the jokes in that 'Punch'—with a shudder. Presently he laid it down and began to think. And then, before his thoughts became quite unbearable, they were interrupted by the sound of a voice in the hall.

He rose and stood with his back to the fire, and as he waited, his eyes on the door, his face grew hot, his brow dark. He had little doubt that the visitor was Clode. He had looked to see him before, and even anticipated the relief of pouring his thoughts into a friendly ear. Nevertheless, now the thing had come, he dreaded the first moment of meeting, scarcely knowing how to bear himself in these changed circumstances.

But it was not Clode who entered. It

was Jack Smith. The rector started, and, uncertain whether the barrister had heard of the blow which had fallen on him or no, stepped forward awkwardly, and held out his hand in a constrained fashion. Jack, on his side, had his own reasons for being ill at ease with his friend. The moment, however, the men's hands met they closed on one another in the old hearty fashion, and the grip told the rector that the other knew all. 'You have heard?' he muttered.

'Mr. Bonamy told me,' the barrister answered. 'I came across without delay.'

'*You* do not think I was aware of the earl's mistake, then?' Lindo said, with a faint smile.

'I should as soon believe that I knew of it myself!' Jack replied warmly. He was glad now that he had come. As he and Lindo stood half facing one another, each with an elbow on the mantelshelf, he felt that he

could conquer the chill at his own heart—that, notwithstanding all, his old friend was still dear to him. Perhaps if the rector had been prospering as before, if no cloud had arisen in his sky, it might have been different. As it was, Jack's generous heart went out to him. 'Tell me what happened, old fellow,' he said cheerily—'that is, if you have no objection to taking me into your confidence.'

'I shall be only too glad of your help,' Lindo answered thankfully, feeling indeed—so potent is a single word of sympathy—happier already. 'I would ask you to sit down, Jack,' he continued, in a tone of rather sheepish raillery, 'and have a cup of coffee or some whisky, but I do not know whether I ought to do so, since Lord Dynmore says the things are not mine.'

'I will take the responsibility,' the lawyer answered, briskly ringing the bell. 'Was my lord very rude?'

‘Confoundedly!’ the rector answered. And then he told his story. Jack was surprised to find him more placable than he had expected ; but presently he learned that this moderation was assumed. For the rector rose as he went on, and began to pace the room, and, the motion freeing his tongue, he betrayed little by little the indignation and resentment which he really felt. Jack happened to ask him, with a view to clearing the ground, whether he had quite made up his mind not to resign, and was astonished by the force and anger with which he repudiated the thought of doing so. ‘Resign? No, never!’ he cried, standing still, and almost glaring at his companion. ‘Why should I? What have I done? Was it my mistake, that I am to suffer for it? Was it my fault, that for penalty I am to have the tenour of my life broken? Do you think I can go back to the Docks the same man I left them? I cannot.

Nor is that all, or nearly all,' he added still more warmly—'I have been called a swindler and an impostor. Am I by resigning to plead guilty to the charge?'

'No!' Jack cried, catching fire himself, 'certainly not! I did not intend for a moment to advise that course, my dear fellow. I think you would be acting very foolishly if you resigned under these circumstances.'

'I am glad of that,' the rector said, sitting down with a sigh of relief. 'I feared you did not quite enter into my feelings.'

'I do thoroughly enter into them,' the barrister answered earnestly, 'but I want to do more—I want to help you. You must not go into this business blindly, old man. And, first, I think you ought to take the arch-deacon or some other clergyman into your confidence. Show him the whole of your case, I mean, and——'

‘And act upon his advice?’ the young rector said, rebellion already flashing in his eye.

‘No, not necessarily,’ the barrister answered, skilfully adapting his tone to the irritability of his patient. ‘Of course your *bona fides* at the time you accepted the living is the point of importance to you, Lindo. You did not see their solicitors—the earl’s people, I mean—did you?’

‘No,’ the rector answered somewhat sullenly.

‘Then their letters conveyed to you all you knew of the living and the offer?’

‘Precisely.’

‘Let us see them, then,’ replied Jack, rising briskly from his chair. He had already determined to say nothing of the witness whom Mr. Bonamy had mentioned to him as asserting that the rector had bribed him. He knew enough of his friend to utterly disbe-

lieve the story, and he considered it as told to him in confidence. ‘There is no time like the present,’ he continued. ‘You have kept the letters, of course?’

‘They are here,’ Lindo answered, rising also, and unlocking as he spoke the little cupboard among the books; ‘I made them into a packet and indorsed them soon after I came. They have been here ever since.’

He found them after a moment’s search, and, without himself examining them, threw them to Jack, who had returned to his seat. The barrister untied the string and, glancing quickly at the dates of the letters, arranged them in order and flattened them out on his knee. ‘Now,’ he said, ‘number one! That I think I have seen before.’ He mumbled over the opening sentences, and turned the page. ‘Hallo!’ he exclaimed, holding the letter from him, and speaking in a tone of surprise—almost of consternation—‘how is this?’

‘What?’ said the rector.

‘You have torn off the latter part of this letter? Why on earth did you do that?’

‘I never did,’ Lindo answered incredulously. Obeying Jack’s gesture he came, and, standing by his chair, looked over his shoulder. He saw then that part of the latter half of the sheet had been torn off. The signature and the last few words of the letter were gone. He looked and wondered. ‘I never did it,’ he said positively, ‘whoever did. You may be sure of that.’

‘You are certain?’

‘Absolutely certain,’ the rector answered with considerable warmth. ‘I remember arranging and indorsing the packet. I am quite sure that this letter was intact then, for I read each one through. That was a few evenings after I came here.’

‘Have you ever shown the letters to anyone?’ Jack asked suspiciously.

‘Never,’ said the rector; ‘they have not been removed from this cupboard, to my knowledge, since I put them there.’

‘Think!’ Jack rejoined, pressing his point steadily. ‘I want you to be quite sure. You see this letter is rendered utterly worthless by the mutilation. Indeed, to produce it would be to raise a natural suspicion that the last sentence of the letter not being in our favour, we had got rid of it. Of course the chances are that the earl’s solicitors have copies, but for the present that is not our business.’

‘Well,’ said the rector somewhat absently—he had been rather thinking than listening—‘I do remember now a circumstance which may account for this. A short time after I came a man broke into the house and ransacked this cupboard. Possibly he did it.’

‘A burglar, do you mean? Was he

caught?' the barrister asked, figuratively pricking up his ears.

'No—or, rather, I should say yes,' Lindo answered. And then he explained how his curate, taking the man red-handed, had let him go, in the hope that, as it was his first offence, he would take warning and live honestly.

'But who was the burglar?' Jack inquired. 'You know, I suppose? Is he in the town now?'

'Clode never told me his name,' Lindo answered. 'The man made a point of that, and I did not press for it. I remember that Clode was somewhat ashamed of his clemency.'

'He had need to be,' Jack snorted. 'It sounds an extraordinary story. All the same, Lindo, I am not sure it has any connection with this.' He held the letter up before him as though drawing inspiration from it. 'This letter, you see,' he went on presently, 'being

the first in date would be inside the packet. Why should a man who wanted perhaps a bit of paper for a spill or a pipe-light unfasten this packet and take the innermost letter? I do not believe it.'

'But no one else save myself,' Lindo urged, 'has had access to the letter. And there it is torn.'

'Yes, here it is torn,' Jack admitted, gazing thoughtfully at it; 'that is true.'

For a few moments the two sat silent, Jack fingering the letter, Lindo with his eyes fixed gloomily on the fire. Suddenly the latter broke out without warning or preface. 'What a fool I have been!' he exclaimed, his tone one of abrupt overwhelming conviction. 'Good heavens, what a fool I have been!'

His friend looked at him in surprise, and saw that his face was crimson. 'Is it about the letter?' he asked, leaning forward, his tone sharp with professional impatience.

‘You do not mean to say, Lindo, that you really——’

‘No, no!’ the young clergyman replied, ruthlessly interrupting him. ‘It has nothing to do with the letter.’

He said no more, and Jack waited for further light; but none came, and the barrister reapplied his thoughts to the problem before him. He had only just hit upon a new idea, however, when he was again diverted by an interruption from Lindo. ‘Jack,’ said the latter impressively, ‘I want you to give a message for me.’

‘Not a cartel to Lord Dynmore, I hope?’ the barrister muttered.

‘No,’ the rector answered, getting up and poking the fire unnecessarily—what a quantity of embarrassment has been liberated before now by means of pokers!—‘no, I want you to give a message to your cousin—Miss Bonamy, I mean.’ The rector paused, the

poker still in his hand, and stole a sharp glance at his companion; but, reassured by the discovery that he was to all appearance buried in the letter, he continued: 'Would you mind telling her that I am sorry I misjudged her a short time back—she will understand—and behaved, I fear, very ungratefully to her? She warned me that there was a rumour afloat that something was amiss with my title, and I am afraid I was very rude to her. I should like you to tell her, if you will, that I—that I am particularly ashamed of myself,' he added, with a gulp.

He did not find the words easy of utterance—far from it; but the effort they cost him was slight and trivial compared with that which poor Jack found himself called upon to make. For a moment, indeed, he was silent, his heart rebelling against the task assigned to him. To carry *his* message to *her*! Then his nobler self answered to the call, and he

spoke. His words, 'Yes, I'll tell her,' came, it is true, a little late, in a voice a trifle thick, and were uttered with a coldness which Lindo would have remarked had he not been agitated himself. But they came—at a price. The Victoria Cross for moral courage can seldom be gained by a single act of valour. Many a one has failed to gain it who had strength enough for the first blow. 'Yes, I will tell her,' Jack repeated a few seconds later, folding up the letter and laying it on the table, but so contriving that his face was hidden from his friend. 'To-morrow will do, I suppose?' he added, the faintest tinge of irony in his tone. He may be pardoned if he thought the apology he was asked to carry came a little late.

'Oh, yes, to-morrow will do,' Lindo answered with a start; he had fallen into a reverie, but now roused himself. 'I am afraid you are very tired, old fellow,' he continued,

looking gratefully at his friend. 'A friend in need is a friend indeed, you know. I cannot tell you'—with a sigh—'how very good I think it was of you to come to me.'

'Nonsense!' Jack said briskly. 'It was all in the day's work. As it is, I have done nothing. And that reminds me,' he continued, facing his companion with a smile—'what of the trouble between my uncle and you? About the sheep, I mean. You have put it in some lawyers' hands, have you not?'

'Yes,' Lindo answered reluctantly.

'Quite right too,' said the barrister. 'Who are they?'

'Turner & Grey, of Birmingham.'

'Well, I will write,' Jack answered, 'if you will let me, and tell them to let the matter stand for the present. I think that will be the best course. Bonamy won't object.'

'But he has issued a writ,' the rector explained. A writ seemed to him a formid-

able engine. As well dally before the mouth of a cannon.

Jack, who knew better, smiled. The law's delays were familiar to him. He was aware of many a pleasant little halting-place between writ and judgment. 'Never mind about that,' he answered, with a confident laugh. 'Shall I settle it for you? I shall know better, perhaps, what to say to them.'

The rector assented gladly; adding, 'Here is their address.' It was stuck in the corner of a picture hanging over the fireplace. He took it down as he spoke and gave it to Jack, who put it carelessly into his pocket, and, seizing his hat, said he must go at once—that it was close on twelve. The rector would have repeated his thanks; but Jack would not stop to hear them, and in a moment was gone.

Reginald Lindo returned to the study after letting him out, and, dropping into the

nearest chair, looked round with a sigh. Yet, the sigh notwithstanding, he was less unhappy now than he had been at dinner or while looking over that number of 'Punch.' His friend's visit had both cheered and softened him. His thoughts no longer dwelt on the earl's injustice, the desertion of his friends, or the humiliations in store for him; but went back to the warning Kate Bonamy had given him. Thence it was not unnatural that they should revert to the beginning of his acquaintance with her. He pictured her at Oxford, he saw her scolding Daintry in the stiff drawing-room, he saw her coming to meet him in the Red Lane; and, the veil of local prejudice being torn from his eyes by the events of the day, he began to discern that Kate, with all the drawbacks of her surroundings, was the fairest and noblest girl he had met at Claversham, or, for aught he could remember, elsewhere. His eyes glistened.

He felt sure that for all the earls in England she would not have deserted him !

He had reached this point, and Jack had been gone five minutes or more, when he was startled by a loud rap at the house door. He stood up and, wondering who it could be at that hour, took a candle and went into the hall. Setting the candlestick on a table, he opened the door, and there, to his astonishment, was Jack come back again !

‘Ah, good!’ said the barrister, slipping in and shutting the door behind him, as though his return were not in the least degree extraordinary, ‘I thought it was you. Look here ; there is one thing I forgot to ask you, Lindo. Where did you get the address of those lawyers?’

He asked the question so earnestly, and his face, now that it could be seen by the strong light of the candle at his elbow, wore so curious an expression, that the rector was

for a moment quite taken aback. 'They are good people, are they not?' he asked, wondering much.

'Oh, yes, the firm is good enough,' Jack answered impatiently. 'But who gave you their address?'

'Clode,' the rector answered. 'I went round to his lodgings and he wrote it down for me.'

'At his lodgings?' the barrister exclaimed.

'Certainly.'

'You are quite sure it was at his lodgings?'

'I am quite sure.'

'Ah! then look here,' Jack replied, laying his hand on Lindo's sleeve and looking up at him with an air of peculiar seriousness—'just tell me once more, so that I may have no doubt about it. Are you sure that from the time you docketed those letters until now you have never removed them—from this house, I mean?'

‘Never!’

‘Never let them go out of the house?’

‘Never!’ the rector answered firmly. ‘I am as certain of it as a man can be certain of anything.’

‘Thanks!’ Jack cried. ‘All right. Good-night.’

And that was all. In a twinkling he had the door open and was gone, leaving the rector to go to bed in a such a state of mystification as made him almost forget his fallen fortunes.

CHAPTER XIX

THE DAY AFTER

THE rector did not expect to see Jack again for a time, and his first thought on rising next morning was of his curate. He had looked to see him, as we know, before bedtime. Disappointed in this, he still felt certain that the curate would hasten as soon as possible to offer his sympathy and assistance; and after breakfast he repaired to his study for the express purpose of receiving him. To find one friend in need is good, but to find two is better. The young clergyman felt, as people in trouble of a certain kind do feel, that though he had told Jack all about it, it would be a relief to tell Stephen all about it also;

the more as Jack, whom he had told, was his personal friend, while Clode was identified with the place, and his unabated confidence and esteem—of retaining which the rector made no doubt—would go some way towards soothing the latter's wounded pride.

It was well, however, that Lindo, sitting down at his writing-table, found there some scattered notes upon which he could employ his thoughts, and which without any great concentration of mind he could form into a sermon. For otherwise his time would have been wasted. Ten o'clock came, and eleven, and half-past eleven ; but no curate.

Mr. Clode, in fact, was engaged elsewhere. About half-past ten he turned briskly into the drive leading to Mrs. Hammond's house and walked up it at a good pace, with the step of a man who has news to tell, and is going to tell it. The morning was bright and sunny, the air crisp and fresh, yet not too cold. The

gravel crunched pleasantly under his feet, while the hoar-frost melting on the dark-green leaves of the laurels bordered his path with a million gems as brilliant as evanescent. Possibly the pleasure he took in these things, possibly some thought of his own, lent animation to the curate's face and figure as he strode along. At any rate Miss Hammond, meeting him suddenly at a turn in the approach, saw a change in him, and, reading the signs aright, blushed.

‘Well?’ she said, smiling a question as she held out her hand. They had scarcely been alone together since the afternoon when the rector's inopportune call had brought about an understanding between them.

‘Well?’ he answered, retaining her hand. ‘What is it, Laura?’

‘I thought you were going to tell me,’ she said, glancing up with shy assurance. The morning air was not fresher. She was so

bright and piquant in her furs and with her dazzling complexion, that other eyes than her lover's might have been pardoned for likening her to the frost-drops on the laurels. At any rate, she sparkled as they did.

He looked down at her, fond admiration in his eyes. Had he not come up on purpose to see her? 'I think it is all right,' he said, in a slightly lower tone. 'I think I may answer for it, Laura, that we shall not have much longer to wait.'

She gazed at him, seeming for the moment startled and taken by surprise. 'Have you heard of a living, then?' she murmured, her eyes wide, her breath coming and going.

He nodded.

'Where?' she asked, in the same low tone. 'You do not mean—here?'

He nodded again.

'At Claversham!' she exclaimed. 'Then will Mr. Lindo have to go, do you think?'

‘I think he will,’ Clode answered, a glow of triumph warming his dark face and kindling his eyes. ‘When Lord Dynmore left here yesterday he drove straight to Mr. Bonamy’s. You hardly believe it, do you? Well, it is true, for I had it from a sure source. And, that being so, I do not think Lindo will have much chance against such an alliance. It is not as if he had many friends here, or had got on well with the people.’

‘The poor people like him,’ she urged.

‘Yes,’ Clode answered sharply. ‘He has spent money amongst them. It was not his own, you see.’

It was a brutal thing to say, and she cast a glance of gentle reproof at him. She did not remonstrate, however, but, slightly changing the subject, asked, ‘Still, if Mr. Lindo goes, you are not sure of the living?’

‘I think so,’ he answered, smiling confidently down at her.

She looked puzzled. 'How do you know?' she asked. 'Did Lord Dynmore promise it to you?'

'No ; I wish he had,' he answered quickly, 'All the same, I think I am fairly sure of it without the promise.' And then he related to her what the archdeacon had told him as to Lord Dynmore's intention of presenting the curates in future. 'Now do you see, Laura?' he said.

'Yes, I see,' she answered, looking down, and absently poking a hole in the gravel with the point of her umbrella.

'And you are content?'

'Yes,' she answered, looking up brightly from a little dream of the rectory as it should be, when feminine taste had transformed it with the aid of Persian rugs and old china and the hundred knick-knacks which are half a woman's life—'Yes, I am content, Mr. Clode.'

'Say "Stephen."'

‘I am content, Stephen,’ she answered obediently, a bright blush for a moment mingling with her smile.

He was about to make some warm rejoinder, when the sound of footsteps approaching from the house diverted his attention, and he looked up. The new-comer was Mrs. Hammond, on her way into the town. She waved her hand to him. ‘Good-morning,’ she cried in her cheery voice—‘you are just the person I wanted to see, Mr. Clode. This is good luck. Now, how is he?’

‘Who? Mrs. Hammond,’ said the curate, taken off his guard.

‘Who?’ she replied, reproach in her tone. She was a kind-hearted woman, and the scene in her drawing-room had really cost her a few minutes’ sleep. ‘Why, Mr. Lindo, to be sure. Whom else should I mean? I suppose you went in last night at once and told him how much we all sympathised with him?’

Indeed, I hope you did not leave him until you saw him well to bed, for I am sure he was hardly fit to be left alone, poor fellow !’

Mr. Clode stood silent, and looked troubled. Really, if it had occurred to him, he would have called to see Lindo. But it had not occurred to him, after what had happened—perhaps because he had been busied about things which ‘seemed worth while.’ He regretted now that he had not done so, since Mrs. Hammond seemed to think it so much a matter of course ; the more as the omission compelled him to choose his side earlier than he need have done. However, it was too late now. So he shook his head. ‘I have not seen him, Mrs. Hammond,’ he said gravely. ‘I have not been to the rectory.’

‘What ! you have not seen him ?’ she cried in amazement.

‘No, Mrs. Hammond, I have not,’ he answered, a slight tinge of hauteur in his manner.

After all, he reflected, he would have found it painful to play another part before Laura after disclosing so much of his mind to her. ‘What is more, Mrs. Hammond,’ he continued, ‘I am not anxious to see him ; for, to tell you the truth, I fear that the meeting could only be a painful one.’

‘Why, you do not mean to say,’ the lady answered in a low, awe-stricken voice, ‘that you think he knew anything about it, Mr. Clode?’

‘At any rate,’ the curate replied firmly, ‘I cannot acquit him.’

‘Not acquit him ! Not acquit Mr. Lindo !’ she stammered.

‘No, I cannot,’ Clode replied, striving to express in his voice and manner his extreme conscientiousness and the gloomy sense of responsibility under which he had arrived at his decision. ‘I cannot get out of my head,’ he continued gravely, ‘Lord Dynmore’s re-

mark that, if the circumstances aroused suspicion in my mind, they could scarcely fail to apprise Mr. Lindo, who was more nearly concerned, of the truth, or something like the truth. Mind!’ the curate added with a great show of candour, ‘I do not say, Mrs. Hammond, that Mr. Lindo knew. I only say I think he suspected.’

‘Well, *that* is very good of you!’ Mrs. Hammond exclaimed, with a spirit and a power of sarcasm he had not expected. ‘I daresay Mr. Lindo will be much obliged to you for *that*! But, for my part, I think it is a distinction without a difference!’ And she nodded her head two or three times in great excitement.

‘Oh, no!’ the curate protested hastily.

‘Well, I think it is, at any rate!’ retorted the lady, very red in the face, and with all the bugles in her bonnet shaking. ‘However, everyone to his opinion. But that is not

mine, and I am sorry it is yours. Why, you are his curate!’ she added in a tone of indignant wonder, which brought the blood to Clode’s cheeks, and made him bite his lip in impotent anger. ‘You ought to be the last person to doubt him!’

‘Can I help it if I do?’ he answered sullenly.

An angry reply was on Mrs. Hammond’s lips, but her daughter intercepted it. ‘Mother,’ she said hurriedly, ‘if Mr. Clode thinks in that way, can he be blamed for telling us? We are not the town. What he has told us he has told us in confidence.’

‘A confidence Mrs. Hammond has made me bitterly regret,’ he rejoined, taking skilful advantage of the intervention.

Mrs. Hammond grunted. She was still angry, but she felt herself baffled. ‘Well, I do not understand these things, perhaps,’ she

said. 'But I do not agree with Mr. Clode, and I am not going to pretend to.'

'I am sure he does not wish you to,' said Laura sweetly. 'Only you did not quite understand, I think, that he was only giving us his private opinion. Of course he would not tell it to the town.'

'Well, that makes a difference, of course,' Mrs. Hammond allowed. 'But now I will say good-morning! For myself, I shall go straight to the rectory and inquire. Are you coming, Laura?'

Laura hesitated a moment, but she thought it prudent to go, and, with a bright little nod, she tripped after her mother. Mr. Clode, thus deserted, walked slowly down the drive, and wondered whether he had been premature in his revolt. He did not think so; and yet he wished he had not been so hasty—that he had not shown his hand quite so early. He had been a little carried away by the events of the

previous afternoon. Even now, however, the more he thought of it, the more hopeless seemed the rector's position. Openly denounced by his patron as an impostor, at war with his churchwarden, disliked by a powerful section of the parish, one action already commenced against him and another threatened—what else could he do but resign? ‘He may say he will not, to-day and to-morrow,’ the curate thought, smiling darkly to himself; ‘but they will be too much for him the day after.’

And whether Mr. Clode told this opinion of his in the town or not, it was certainly a very common one. Never had Claversham been treated to such a dish of gossip as this. On the evening of the bazaar, before the unsold goods had been cleared from the tables, the wildest rumours were already afloat in the town. The rector had been arrested; he had decamped; he was to be tried for fraud; he

was not in holy orders at all; Mrs. Bedford would have to be married over again! With the morning these reports died away, and something like the truth came to be known—to the inexpressible satisfaction of Dr. Gregg and his like. The doctor was in and out of half the houses in the town that day. ‘Resign!’ he would say with a shriek—‘of course he will resign! And glad to escape so easily!’ Dr. Gregg, indeed, was in his glory now. The parts were reversed. It was for him now to meet the rector with a patronising nod; only, for some reason best known to himself, and perhaps arising from a subtle difference between the two men, he preferred to celebrate his triumph figuratively, and behind Lindo’s back.

What was said, and how it was said, can easily be imagined. When a man, who for some cause has held his head a little above his neighbours, stumbles and falls, we know

what is likely to be said of him. And the young rector knew, and in his heart and in his study suffered horribly. All the afternoon of the day after the bazaar he walked the town with a smile on his face, ostensibly visiting in his district, really vindicating his pride and courage. He carried his head as high as ever, and the skirts of his long black coat fluttered as bravely as before. Dr. Gregg, who saw him from the Reading-room window, gave it as his opinion that he did not know what shame meant. But at heart the young man was very miserable. He knew that inquisitive eyes were upon his every gesture; that he was watched, jeered at, worst of all—pitied. He guessed, as the day wore on, drawing the inference from the curate's avoidance of him, that even Clode had deserted him. And this perhaps, almost as much as the resentment he harboured against Lord Dynmore, hardened him in his

resolve not to resign or abate one tittle of his rights.

He fancied he stood alone. But, of course, there were some who sympathised with him, and some who held their tongues and declined to commit themselves to any opinion. Among the latter Mr. Bonamy was conspicuous, much to the disgust of Dr. Gregg, whose first expression on hearing the news had been, 'What nuts for Bonamy!' As a fact, the snappish little doctor had never found his friend so morose and unpleasant as when he tried to sound him on this subject. He first espied him on the other side of the street, and rushed across, stuttering, almost before he reached him, 'Well? He will have to resign, won't he?'

'Who?' Mr. Bonamy said, standing still, and fixing his cold grey eyes on the excited little man. 'Who will have to resign?'

‘Why, the rector, to be sure!’ rejoined Gregg, feeling the check unpleasantly.

‘Will he?’

‘Well, I should say so,’ urged the doctor, now quite taken aback, and gazing at the other with eyes of surprise. ‘But I suppose you know best, Bonamy.’

‘Then I am going to keep my knowledge to myself!’ snarled the lawyer. And, rattling a handful of silver in his pocket, he stalked away, his hat on the back of his head, and his lank figure more ungainly than usual. In truth, he was in a very bad temper. He was angry with Lord Dynmore and dissatisfied with himself; given, indeed, to calling himself, half-a-dozen times in an hour, a quixotic fool for having thrown away the earl’s business for the sake of a scruple which was little more than a whim. It is all very well to have a queer rugged code of honour of one’s own, and to observe it. But when the observance

sends away business—such business as brings with it the social consideration which men prize most highly when they most affect to despise it—why then a man is apt to take out his self-denial in ill-temper. Mr. Bonamy did so.

So Dr. Gregg went away calling the lawyer a bear, and an ill-bred fellow who did not know his own friends. Alas! the same thing might have been said, and with greater justice, of the rector. The archdeacon sat an hour in the rectory study, waiting patiently for him to return from his district, and after all got but a sorry reception. The elder man expressed, and expressed very warmly—he had come to do so—his full belief in Lindo's honesty and good faith, and was greatly touched by the effect his words produced upon the young fellow; who had come into the room, on learning his visitor's presence, with set lips and eyes of challenge,

but had by-and-by to turn his back and look out of the window, while in a very low tone he murmured his thanks. But, alas! the archdeacon went farther than sympathy. He let drop something about concession, and then the boat was over!

‘Concession!’ said the young man, turning as on a pivot, with every hair of his head bristling, and his voice clear enough now. ‘What kind of concession do you mean?’

‘Well,’ said the archdeacon persuasively, ‘the earl is a choleric man—a most passionate man, I know; and, when excited, utterly foolish and wrong-headed. But in his cooler moments I do not know anyone more just or, indeed, more generous. I feel sure that if you could prevail on yourself to meet him half-way——’

‘To meet him half-way? By resigning, do you mean?’ snapped the rector, interrupting him point-blank with the question.

‘Oh, no, no,’ said the archdeacon, ‘I do not mean that.’

‘Then in what way? How?’

But as the archdeacon really meant by resigning, he could not answer the question. And the interview ended in Lindo roundly stating his views, as he walked up and down the room. ‘I will not resign!’ he declared. ‘Understand that, archdeacon! I will not resign! If Lord Dynmore can put me out, well and good—let him. If not, I stay. He may be just or generous,’ the young man continued scornfully—‘all I know is that he insulted me grossly, and as no gentleman would have insulted another.’

‘He is passionate, and was taken by surprise,’ the archdeacon ventured to say. But the words were wasted, Lindo would not listen; and his visitor had presently to go, fearing that he had done more harm than good by his mediation. As for the rector, he

was severely scolded later in the evening by Jack Smith for having omitted to lay the letters offering him the living before the arch-deacon, or to explain to him the precise circumstances under which he had accepted it.

‘But he said he did not doubt me,’ the rector urged rather fractiously.

‘Pooh! that is not the point,’ the barrister retorted. ‘Of course he does not. He knows you. But I want you to put him in possession of such a case as he may lay before others who do not know you. Look here, you are acquainted with a man called Felton, are you not?’

‘Yes,’ Lindo answered, with a slight start.

‘Well, perhaps you are not aware that he has been to Lord Dynmore—so the tale runs in the town, and I know it is true—and stated that you have been for weeks bribing him to keep the secret.’

The rector sat motionless, staring at his

friend. 'I did not know it,' he said at last, quite quietly. He was becoming accustomed to surprises of this kind. 'It is a wicked lie, of course.'

'Of course,' Jack assented, tossing one leg easily over the other, and thrusting his hands deep into his trousers' pockets. 'But what do you say to it?'

'The man came to me,' Lindo explained, 'and told me that he was Lord Dynmore's servant, and that, crossing from America, he had foolishly lost his money at play. He begged me to assist him until Lord Dynmore's return, and I did so. Some ten days ago I discovered that he was leading a disreputable life, and I stopped the allowance.'

'Thanks,' Jack answered, nodding his head. 'That is precisely what I thought. But the mischief of it is, you see, that the man's tale may be true in his eyes. He may believe that he was blackmailing you. And

therefore, since we cannot absolutely refute his story, it is the more important that we should show as good a case as possible *aliunde*. Nor does it make any difference,' Jack continued drily, 'that the man, after seeing Lord Dynmore last night, has taken himself off this morning.'

'What! Felton?' the rector exclaimed, coming suddenly upright.

'Yes. There is no doubt he has absconded. Bonamy's clerk has been after him all day, and has discovered that he begged half-a-crown from your curate, to whom he was seen speaking at the Top of the Town about ten this morning. Since that time he has not been seen.'

'He may turn up yet,' said the rector.

'I do not think he will,' the barrister replied, with a shrewd gleam in his eyes. 'But you must not flatter yourself that his disappearance will do you any good. Of

course some people will say that he was afraid to remain and support a false statement. But more, I fear, will lean to the opinion that he was got out of the way by some one—you, for instance.'

'I see,' said Lindo slowly, after a long pause. 'Then it is the more imperative that I should not dream of resigning.'

'Certainly,' said Jack. 'It would be madness.'

CHAPTER XX

A SUDDEN CALL

DAINTRY was sitting in the dining-room a few mornings after the bazaar. She looked up from her Ollendorf, as her sister entered the room about some housekeeping matter; and, more for the sake of wasting a moment than for any other reason, attacked her. ‘Kate,’ she said with a yawn, ‘are you never going to see old Peggy Jones again? I am sure that you have not been near her for a fortnight?’

‘I ought to go, I know,’ Kate answered, pausing by the sideboard, with a big bunch of keys dangling from her fingers and an absent expression in her grey eyes. ‘I have not been for some time.’

‘I should think you had not!’ Daintry retorted with severity. ‘You have hardly been out of the house the last four days.’

A faint colour stole into the elder girl’s face, and, seeming suddenly to recollect what she wanted, she turned and began to search in the drawer behind her. She knew quite well that what Daintry said was true—that she had not been out for four days. Jack had delivered the rector’s message to her, and she had listened with downcast eyes and grave composure—a composure so perfect that even the messenger who held the clue in his hand was almost deceived by it. All the same, it had made her very happy. The young rector appreciated at last the motive which had led her to give him that strange warning. He was grateful to her, and anxious to make her understand his gratitude. And while she dwelt on this with pleasure, she foresaw with a strange mingling of joy and fear, of anticipa-

tion and shrinking, that the first time she met him abroad he would strive to make it still more clear to her.

So for four days, lest she should seem even to herself to be precipitating the meeting, she had refrained from going out. Now, when Daintry remarked upon the change in her habits, she blushed at the thought that she might all the time have been exaggerating a trifle ; and, though she did not go out at once, in the course of the afternoon she did issue forth, and called upon old Peggy. Coming back she had to pass through the churchyard, and there, on the very spot where she had once forced herself to address him, she met the rector.

She saw him while he was still some way off, and before he saw her, and she looked eagerly for any trace of the trouble of the last few days. It had not changed him, outwardly at any rate. It had rather accentuated him,

she thought. He looked more boyish, more impetuous, more independent than ever, as he came swinging along, his blonde head thrown back, his eyes roving this way and that, his long skirts flapping behind him. Of defeat or humiliation he betrayed not a trace ; and the girl wondered, seeing him so calm and strong, if he had really sent her that message—which seemed to have come from a man hard pressed.

A glance told her all this ; and then he saw her, and, a flash of recognition sweeping across his face, quickened his steps to meet her. He seemed to be shaking hands with her before he had well considered what he would say, for when he had gone through that ceremony, and wished her ‘Good morning,’ he stood awkwardly silent. Then he murmured hurriedly, ‘I have been waiting for some time to speak to you, Miss Bonamy.’

‘Indeed ?’ she said calmly. She wondered at her own self-control.

‘Yes,’ he answered, his colour rising. ‘And I could not have met you in a better place.’

‘Why?’ she asked. As if she did not know? The simplest woman is an actress by nature.

‘Because,’ he answered, ‘it is well that I should do penance where I sinned. Miss Bonamy,’ he continued impetuously, yet in a low voice, and with his eyes on the ground, ‘I owe you a deep apology for my rude thanklessness when I met you here last. You were right and I was wrong; but if it had been the other way, still I ought not to have behaved to you as I did. I thought—that is—I——’

He faltered and stopped. He meant that he had thought that she was playing into her father’s hands, but he could hardly tell her that. She understood, however, or guessed, and for the first time she blushed. ‘Pray,

do not say any more about it,' she said hurriedly.

'I did send you a message,' he answered.

'Oh, yes, yes,' she replied, anxious only to put an end to his apologies. 'Please think no more about it.'

'Well,' he rejoined with a smile which did not completely veil his earnestness, 'I do find it a little more pleasant to look farther back—to our Oxford visit. But you are going this way. May I turn with you?'

'I am only going home,' Kate answered coldly. He had been humble enough to her. He had said and looked all she had expected. But he was not at all the crushed, beaten man whom she had looked to meet. He was, outwardly at least, the same man who had once sought her society for a few weeks and had then slighted her and shunned her, that he might consort with the Homfrays and their class. He had not said he was sorry for *that*.

He read her tone aright, and coloured furiously, growing a thousand times more confused than before. It was on the cards that he would accept the rebuff, and leave her. Indeed, that was his first impulse. But the consciousness, which the next moment filled his mind, that he had deserved this, and perhaps the charm of her grey eyes, overcame him. 'I will come a little way with you, if you will let me,' he said, turning and walking by her side.

Kate's heart gave a great leap. She understood both the first thought and the second, the weaker impulse and the stronger one which mastered it, and she would not have been a woman had she not felt her triumph. She hastened to find something to say, and could think only of the bazaar. She asked him if it had been a success.

'The bazaar?' he answered. 'To tell you the truth, I am afraid I hardly know. I

should say so, now you ask me, but I have not given much thought to it since. I have been too fully occupied with other things,' he added, a note of bitterness in his voice. 'Ah! Miss Bonamy,' with a fresh change of tone, 'what a good fellow your cousin is!'

'Yes, he is indeed!' she answered heartily.

'I cannot tell you,' he continued, 'what generous help and support he has given me during the last few days. He has been of the greatest possible comfort to me.'

She looked up at him impulsively. 'He is Daintry's hero,' she said.

'Yes,' he answered laughing, 'I remember that her praise made me almost jealous of him. That was when I first knew you—when I was coming to Claversham, you remember, Miss Bonamy, full of pleasant anticipations. The reality has been different. Jack has told you, of course, of Lord Dynmore's strange attack upon me? But perhaps,' he added,

checking himself, and glancing at her, 'I ought not to speak to you about it, as your father is acting for him.'

'I do not think he is,' she murmured, looking straight before her.

'But—it is true the only communication I have had has been from London—still I thought—I mean I was under the impression that Lord Dynmore had at once gone to your father.'

'I think he saw him at the office,' Kate answered, 'but I believe my father is not acting for him.'

'Do you know why?' asked the rector bluntly. 'Why he is not, I mean?'

'No,' she said—that and nothing more. She was too proud to defend her father, though he had let drop enough in the family circle to enable her to form her own conclusions, and she might have made out a story which would have set the lawyer in a

light differing much from that in which the rector was accustomed to view him.

Reginald Lindo walked on considering the matter. Suddenly he said, 'The archdeacon thinks I ought to resign. What do you think, Miss Bonamy?'

Her heart began to beat quickly, and with good cause. He was seeking her advice! He was asking her opinion in this matter so utterly important to him, so absolutely vital! For a moment she could not speak, she was so filled with surprise. Then she said gently, her eyes on the pavement, 'I do not think I can judge.'

'But you must have heard—more I dare say than I have!' he rejoined with a forced laugh. 'Will you tell me what you think?'

She looked before her, her face troubled. Then she spoke bravely.

'I think you should judge for yourself,' she said in a low tone, full of serious feeling.

‘The responsibility is yours, Mr. Lindo. I do not think that you should depend entirely on anyone’s advice. I mean, you should try to do right according to your conscience—not acting hastily, but coolly, and on reflection.’

They were almost at Mr. Bonamy’s door when she said this, and he traversed the remainder of the distance without speaking. At the steps he halted and held out his hand. ‘Thank you,’ he said simply, his eyes seeking hers for a moment and dwelling on them, a steady light in their gaze. ‘I hope I shall use this advice to better purpose than the last you gave me. Good-bye.’

She bowed silently, and went in, her heart full of strange rapture, and he turned back and walked up the street. The dusk was falling. A few yards in front of him the lame lamplighter was going his rounds, ladder on shoulder. In many of the shops the gas

was beginning to gleam. The night was coming, was almost come, yet still above the houses the sky, a pale greenish blue, was bright with daylight, against which the great tower of the church stood up bulky and black. The young man was in a curious mood. Though he walked the common pavement, he felt himself, as he gazed upwards, alone with his thoughts which went back, whether he would or no, to his first evening in Claversham. He remembered how free from reproach or stumbling-blocks his path had seemed then, to what blameless ends he had in fancy devoted himself. What works of thanksgiving, small but beneficent as the tiny rills which steal downwards through the ferns to the pasture, he had planned. And in the centre of that past dream of the future he pictured now—Kate Bonamy. Well, the reality was different.

He was just beginning to wonder when he

would be likely to meet her again, and to dwell with idle pleasure on some of the details of her dress and appearance, when the sudden clatter of hoofs behind him caused him to turn his head. Far down the steep street a rider had turned the corner, and was galloping up the middle of the roadway, the manner in which he urged on his pony seeming to proclaim disaster and ill news. Opposite the rector he pulled up and cried out, 'Where is the doctor's, sir?'

Lindo turned sharply round and rang the bell of the house behind him, which happened to be Gregg's. 'Here,' he said briefly. 'What is it, my man?'

'An explosion in the Big Pit at Baerton,' the man replied. He was almost blubbing with excitement and the speed at which he had come. 'There is like to be fifty killed and as many hurt, I was told,' he continued; 'but I came straight off.'

‘Good heavens! when did it happen?’ Lindo asked, a wave of wild excitement following his first impulse of horror.

‘About an hour and a quarter ago, as near as I can say,’ the messenger answered. He was merely a farm-labourer called from the plough.

Dr. Gregg was out, and the clergyman walked by the side of the horseman, a crowd gathering behind him as the news spread, to the house of Mr. Keogh, the other doctor, who fortunately lived close by. He was at home, and, the messenger going in to tell him the particulars, in five minutes he had his gig at the door. The rector, who had gone in too, came out with him, and, without asking leave, climbed to the seat beside him.

‘What is this?’ said the surgeon, turning to him sharply. He was an elderly man, stout and white-haired. ‘Are you coming, too, Mr. Lindo?’

‘I think so,’ the rector answered. ‘There may be cases in which you can do little and I much. Mr. Walker, the vicar of Baerton, is ill in bed, I know; and as the news has come to me first, I think I ought to go.’

‘Right you are!’ said Mr. Keogh gruffly, yet with a shrug of the shoulders. ‘Let go!’

In another moment the fast-trotting cob was whirling the two men down the street. They turned the corner sharply, and as the breeze met them on the bridge, compelling Lindo to turn up the collar of his coat and draw the rug more closely round him, the church clock in the town behind them struck the half-hour. ‘Half-past five,’ said the rector. The surgeon did not answer. They were in the open country now, the hedges speeding swiftly by them in the light of the lamps, and the long outline of Baer Hill, a huge misshapen hump which rose into a point at one end, lying dim and black before them.

A night drive is always impressive. In the gloom, in the sough of the wind, in the sky serenely star-lit, or a tumult of hurrying clouds, in the rattle of the wheels, in the monotonous fall of the hoofs, there is an appeal to the sombre side of man. How much more is this the case when the sough of the wind seems to the imagination a cry of pain, and the night is a dark background on which the fancy paints dying faces! At such a time the cares of life, which day by day rise one beyond another and prevent us dwelling over-much on the end, sink into pettiness, leaving us face to face with weightier issues.

‘There have been accidents here before?’ the clergyman asked, after a long silence.

‘Thirty-five years ago there was one!’ his companion answered, with a groan which betrayed his apprehensions. ‘Good heavens, sir, I remember it now! I was young then

and fresh from the hospitals; but it was almost too much for me!’

‘I hope that this one has been exaggerated,’ Lindo replied, entering fully into the other’s feelings. ‘I did not quite understand the man’s account; but, as far as I could follow it, one of the two shafts—the downcast shaft I think he said—was choked by the explosion, and rendered quite useless.’

‘Just what I expected!’ ejaculated his companion.

‘So that they could only reach the workings through the upcast shaft, in which they had rigged up some temporary lifting gear.’

‘Ay, and it is the deepest pit here,’ the surgeon chimed in, as the horse began to breast the steeper part of the ascent, and the furnace fires, before and above them, began to flicker and glow, now sinking into darkness, now flaming up like beacon-lights. ‘The

workings are two thousand feet below the surface, man !’

‘Stop !’ Lindo said. ‘Here is someone looking for us, I think.’

Two women with shawls over their heads came to the side of the gig. ‘Be you the doctors?’ one of them said, peering in. Keogh answered that they were, and then in another minute the two were following her up the side of the cutting which here confined the road. The hillside gained, they were hurried through the darkness round pit-banks and slag-heaps, and under cranes and ruinous sinking walls, and over and under mysterious obstacles, sometimes looming large in the gloom and sometimes lying unseen at their feet—until they emerged at length with startling abruptness into a large circle of dazzling light. Four great fires were burning close together, and round them, motionless and for the most part silent, in appearance almost apathetic, stood

hundreds of dark shadows—men and women waiting for news.

The silence and inaction of so large a crowd struck a chill to Lindo's heart. A tremor ran through him as he advanced with his companion towards a knot of a dozen rough fellows who stood together, some half-stripped, some muffled up in pilot-jackets or coarse shiny clothes. The crowd seemed to be watching them, and they spoke now and then to one another in a desultory expectant fashion, from which he judged they were persons in authority.

‘It is a bad job—a very bad job!’ his companion the doctor was saying nervously, when his attention, which had strayed for a moment, returned to its duty. ‘Is there anything I can do yet?’

‘Well, that depends, doctor,’ answered one of the men, whose manner of speaking proved that he was not a mere working collier.

‘There is no one up yet,’ he explained, eyeing the doctor dubiously. ‘But it does not exactly follow that you can do nothing. Some of us have just come up, and there is a shift of men exploring down there now. Three bodies have been recovered, and they are at the foot of the shaft; and three poor fellows have been found alive, of whom one has since died. The other two are within fifty yards of the shaft, and as comfortable as we can make them. But they are bad—too bad to come up in a bucket; and we can rig up nothing bigger at present, so there they are fixed. The question is, will you go down to them?’

Mr. Keogh’s face fell. He shook his head. He was no longer young, and to descend a sheer depth of six hundred yards in a bucket dangling at the end of a makeshift rope was not in his line. ‘No, thank you,’ he said, ‘I could not do it, indeed.’

‘Come, doctor,’ the man persisted—he was the manager of the neighbouring colliery, as Lindo learned afterwards, ‘you will be there in no time.’

‘Just so,’ said the surgeon drily. ‘I have no doubt I should go down fast enough. It is the coming back is the rub, you see, Mr. Peat. No, thank you, I could not.’

But the other still urged him. ‘These poor fellows are about as bad as they can be, and you know if the mountain will not go to Mahomet, Mahomet must go to the mountain.’

‘I know; and if it were a mountain, well and good,’ Mr. Keogh answered, smiling in sickly fashion as his eye strayed to a black well-like hole close at hand—a mere hole in some loose planks surmounted by a windlass and fringed with ugly wreckage. ‘But it is not. It is quite the other thing, you see.’

Mr. Peat shrugged his shoulders, and glanced at his companions rather in sorrow than surprise. Lindo, standing behind the doctor, saw the look. Till then he had stood silent. Now he pressed forward. 'Did I hear you say that one of the injured men died after he was found?' he asked.

'Yes, that is so,' the manager answered, looking keenly at him, and wondering who he was.

'The others who are hurt—are their lives in danger?'

'I am afraid so,' the man replied reluctantly.

'Then I have a right to be with them,' the rector answered quickly. 'I am a clergyman, and I have hastened here, fearing this might be the case. But I have also attended an ambulance class, and I can dress a burn. Besides, I am a younger man than our friend here, and, if you will let me down, I will go.'

‘By George, sir!’ the manager exclaimed, looking round for approval and smiting his thigh heavily, ‘you are a man as well as a parson, and down you shall go, and thank you! You may make the men more comfortable, and any way you will put heart into them, for you have some to spare yourself. As for danger, there is none!—Jack!’—this in a louder voice to someone in the background—‘just twitch that rope! And get that tub up, will you? Look slippery now.’

Lindo felt a hand on his arm and, obeying the silent gesture of the nearest gaunt figure, stepped aside. In a twinkling the man stripped off the parson’s long coat and put on him the pilot-jacket from his own shoulders; a second man gave him a peaked cap of stiff leather in place of his soft hat; and a third fastened a pit-lamp round his neck, explaining to him how to raise the wick without unlocking the lamp, and showing him that, if it swung too

much on one side or were upset, its flame would expire of itself. And upon one thing Lindo was never tired of dwelling afterwards—the kindly tact of these rough men, and how by seemingly casual words, and even touches, the roughest sought to encourage him, while ignoring the possibility of his feeling alarm.

Meanwhile Mr. Keogh, standing in a state of considerable perplexity and discomfiture where the rector had left him, heard a well-known voice at his elbow, and turned to find that Gregg had arrived. The younger doctor was not the man to be awed into silence, and, as he came up, was speaking loudly. ‘Hallo, Mr. Keogh!’ he said. ‘I heard you were before me. Have you got them all in hand? Cuts or burns mostly, eh?’

‘They are not above ground yet,’ Mr. Keogh answered. He and Gregg were not on speaking terms, but such an emergency as

this was allowed to override their estrangement.

‘Oh, then we shall have to wait,’ Gregg answered, looking round on the scene with a mixture of curiosity and professional *aplomb*. ‘I wish I had spared my horse. Any other medical man here?’

‘No; and they want one of us to go down in the bucket,’ Keogh explained. ‘There are some injured men at the foot of the shaft. I have a wife and children, and I thought that perhaps you——’

‘Would not mind breaking my neck!’ Gregg retorted with decision. ‘No, thank you, not for me! I hope to have a wife and children some day, and I will keep my neck for them. Go down!’ he repeated, looking round with extreme scorn. ‘Pooh! No one can expect us to do it! It is these people’s business, and they are used to it; but there is not a sane man in the kingdom, besides,

would go down that place after what has just happened. It is a quarter of a mile as a stone falls, if it is an inch !’

‘It is all that,’ the other assented, feeling much relieved.

‘And a height makes me giddy,’ Dr. Gregg added.

‘I feel the same of late,’ said his elder.

‘No, every man to his trade,’ Gregg concluded, settling the matter to his satisfaction. ‘Let them bring them up, and we will doctor them. But while they are below ground——Hallo ! Who is this ?’

The next moment he uttered an oath of surprise and anger. As his eye wandered round, it had lit on Lindo coming forward to the shaft ; and the doctor recognised him in spite of his disguise. One look, and Gregg would cheerfully have given ten pounds either to have had the rector away, or to have arrived a little later himself. He had calculated in

his own mind that, if no outsider went down, he could scarcely be blamed for taking care of himself. But, if the rector went down, the matter would wear a different aspect. And Dr. Gregg saw this so clearly that he turned pale with rage and chagrin, and swore again under his breath.

CHAPTER XXI

IN PROFUNDIS

THE young clergyman's face, as he walked forward to the shaft, formed, if the truth be told, no index to his mind. For, while it remained calm and even wore a faint smile, he was inwardly conscious of a strong desire to take hold of anything which presented itself, even a straw. Nevertheless, he stepped gravely into the tub, amid a low murmur ; and, clutching the iron bar above it, felt himself at a word of command lifted gently into the air, and swung over the shaft. For an uncomfortable five seconds or so he remained stationary ; then there was a jerk—another—and the dark figures, the line of faces, and the glare of the

fires leapt suddenly above his head. He found himself in darkness dropping through space with a swift, sickening motion, as of one falling away from himself. His heart rose into his throat. There was a loud buzzing in his ears, and still above this he heard the dull rattling sound of the rope being paid out. Every other sense was spent in the stern grip of his hands on the bar above his head.

The horrible sensation of falling lasted for a few seconds only. It passed away. He was no longer in space with nothing stable about him, but in a small tub at the end of a tough rope. Except for a slight swaying motion, he hardly knew that he was still descending; and presently a faint light, more diffused than his own lamp, grew visible. Then he came gently to a standstill, and some one held up a lantern to his face. With difficulty he made out two huge figures standing beside him, who laid hold of the tub and pulled

it towards them until it rested on something solid. 'You are welcome,' one growled, as, aided by a hand of each, Lindo stepped out. 'You will be the doctor, I suppose, master? Well, this way. Catch hold of my jacket.'

Lindo obeyed, being only too glad of the help thus given him ; for though the men seemed to move about with ease and certainty, he could make out nothing but shapeless gloom. 'Now you sit right down there,' continued the collier, when they had walked a few yards, 'and you will get the sight of your eyes in a bit.'

He did as he was bid ; and one by one the objects about him became visible. His first feeling was one of astonishment. He had put a quarter of a mile of solid earth between himself and the sunlight, and still, for all he could see, he might be merely in a cellar under a street. He found himself seated on a rough bench, in a low-roofed, windowless, wooden

cabin, strangely resembling a very dirty London office in a fog. True, everything was black—very black. On another bench, opposite him, sat the two colliers who had received him, their lamps between their knees. His first impulse was to tell them hurriedly that he was not the doctor. ‘I am afraid you are disappointed,’ he added, ‘but I hope one will follow me down. I am a clergyman, and I want to do something for these poor fellows, if you will take me to them.’

The two men betrayed no surprise, but he who had spoken before quietly poked up the wick of his lamp and held the lantern up so as to get a good view of his face. ‘Ay, ay,’ he said, nodding, as he lowered it again. ‘I thought you weren’t unbeknown to me. You are the parson we fetched to poor Jim Lucas a while ago. Well, Jim will have a rare cageful of his friends with him to-night.’

The rector shuddered. Such apathy, such

matter-of-factness was new to him. But though his heart sank as the collier rose and, swinging his lamp in his hand, passed through the doorway, he made haste to follow him ; and the man's next words, ' You had best look to your steps, master, for there is a deal of rubbish come down '—pointing as they did to a material danger—brought him, in the diversion of his thoughts, something like relief.

The road on which he found himself, being the main heading or highway of the pit, was a good and wide one. It was even possible to stand upright in it. Here and there, however, it was partially blocked by falls of coal caused by the explosion, and over one of these his guide put out his hand to assist him. Lindo's lamp was by this time burning low. The pitman silently took it and raised the wick, a grim smile distorting his face as he handed it back. ' You will be about the first of the gentry,' he muttered,

‘as has been down this pit without paying his footing.’

Lindo took the words for a hint, and was shocked by the man’s insensibility. ‘My good fellow,’ he answered, ‘if that is all, you shall have what you like another time. But for heaven’s sake let us think of these poor fellows now.’

The man turned on him suddenly and swore aloud. ‘Do you think I meant that?’ he cried, with another violent oath.

The rector recoiled, not at the sound of the man’s profanity, but in disgust at his own mistake. Then he held out his hand. ‘My man,’ he said, ‘I beg your pardon. It was I who was wrong. I did not understand you.’

The giant looked at him with another stare, but made no answer, and a dozen steps brought them to a second cabin. Across the doorway—there was no door—hung a rough curtain of matting. This the man raised, and,

holding his lamp over the threshold, invited the rector to look in. 'I guess,' he added significantly, 'that you would not have made that mistake, master, after seeing this.'

Lindo peered in. On the floor, which was little more than six feet square, lay four quiet figures, motionless, and covered with coarse sacking. No eye falling on them could take them for anything but what they were. The visitor shuddered, as his guide let the curtain fall again, muttering, with a backward jerk of the head, 'Two of them I came down with this morning—in the cage.'

The rector had nothing to answer, and the man, preceding him to a cabin a few yards farther on, invited him by a sign to enter, and himself turned back the way they had come. A faint moaning warned Lindo, before he raised the matting, what he must expect to see. Instinctively, as he stepped in, his eyes sought the floor; and although three

pitmen crouching upon one of the benches rose and made way for him, he hardly noticed them, so occupied was he with pitiful looking at the two men lying on coarse beds on the floor. They were bandaged and muffled almost out of human form. One of them was rolling his sightless face monotonously to and fro, pouring out an unceasing stream of delirious talk. The other, whose bright eyes met the newcomer's with eager longing, paused in the murmur which seemed to ease his pain, and whispered 'Doctor!' so hopefully that the sound went straight to Lindo's heart.

To undeceive him, and to explain to the others that he was not the expected surgeon, was a bitter task with which to begin his ministrations; but he was greatly cheered to find that, even in their disappointment, they took his coming as a kindly thing, and eyed him with surprised gratitude. He told them

the latest news from the bank—that a cage would be rigged up in a few hours at farthest, and then, conquering his physical shrinking, he knelt down by the least injured man and tried to turn his surgical knowledge to account. It was not much he could do, but it eased the poor man's present sufferings. A bandage was laid more smoothly here, a little cotton-wool readjusted there, a change of posture managed, a few hopeful words uttered which helped the patient to fight against the shock—so that presently he sank into a troubled sleep. Lindo tried to do his best for the other also, terrible as was the task; but the man's excitement and unceasing restlessness, as well as his more serious injuries, made help here of little avail.

When he rose, he found one of the watchers holding a cup of brandy ready for him; and, sitting down upon the bench behind, he discovered a coat laid there to

make the seat more comfortable, though no one seemed to have done it or to be conscious of his surprise. They talked low to him, and to one another, in a disjointed taciturn fashion, with immense gaps and long intervals of silence. He learned that there were twenty-seven men yet missing, but it was thought that the afterdamp had killed them all. Those already found alive had been in the main heading, where the current of air gave them a better chance.

One or other of the workers was continually going out to listen for the return of the party who were exploring the workings near the foot of the other shaft; and once or twice a member of this party, exhausted or ill, looked in for a dose of tea or brandy, and then stumbled out again to get himself conveyed to the upper air. These looked curiously at the stranger, but, on some information being muttered in their ears, made a

point on going out of giving him a nod which was full of tacit acknowledgment.

In a quiet interval he looked at his watch and wound it up, finding the time to be half-past two. The familiar action carried his mind back to his neat spotless bedroom at the rectory and the cares and anxieties of everyday life, which had been forgotten for the last five hours. Could it be so short a time, he asked himself, since he was troubled by them? It seemed years ago. It seemed as if a gulf, deep as the shaft down which he had come, divided him from them. And yet the moment his thoughts returned to them the gulf became less, and presently, although his eyes were still fixed upon the poor collier's unquiet head and the murky cabin with its smoky lamp, he was really back in Claversham, busied with those thoughts again, and pondering on the time when he should be above ground. The things that had been

important before rose into importance again, but their relative values were altered, in his eyes at any rate. With what he had seen and heard in the last few hours fresh in his mind, with the injured men lying still in his sight—one of them never to see the sun again—he could not but take a different, a wider, a less selfish view of life and its aims. His ideal of existence grew higher and purer, his notion of success more noble. In the light of his own self-forgetting energy and of others' pain he saw things as they affected his neighbour rather than himself; and so presently—not in haste, but slowly, in the watches of the night—he formed a resolution which shall be told presently. The determinations to which men come at such times are, in nine cases out of ten, as transitory as the emotions on which they are based. But this time, and with this man, it was not to be so. Kate Bonamy's words, bringing before his mind the responsi-

bility which rested upon him, had in a degree prepared him to examine his position gravely and from a lofty standpoint ; so that the considerations which now occurred to him could scarcely fail to have due and lasting weight with him, and to leave impressions both deep and permanent.

He was presently roused from his reverie by a sound which caused his companions to rise to their feet and exhibit, for the first time, some excitement. It was the murmur of voices in the heading, which, beginning far away, rapidly approached and gathered strength. Going to the door of the cabin, he saw lights in the gallery becoming each instant more clear. Then the forms of men coming on by twos and threes rose out of the darkness. And so the procession wound in, and Lindo found himself suddenly surrounded—where a moment before no sounds but painful ones had been heard—by the hum

and bustle, the quick questions and answers, of a crowd. For the men brought good news. The missing were found. Though many of them were burned or scorched, and others were suffering from the effects of the after-damp, the explorers brought back with them no still, ominous burden, nor even any case of hopeless injury, such as that of the poor fellow in delirium over whom his mates bent with the strange impassive patience which seems to be a quality peculiar to those who get their living underground.

Not that Lindo at the time had leisure to consider their behaviour. The injured were brought to him as a matter of course, and he did what he could with simple bandages and liniment to keep the air from their wounds and to enable the men to reach the surface with as little pain as possible. For more than an hour, as he passed from one to the other, his hands were never empty; he could think

only of his work. The deputy-manager, who had been leading the rescue party, was thoroughly prostrated. The rest never doubted that the stranger was a surgeon, and it was curious to see their surprise when the general taciturnity allowed the fact that he was only a parson to leak out. They were like savants with a specimen which, known to belong to a particular species, has none of the class attributes, and sets at defiance all preconceived ideas upon the subject. He, too, when he was at length free to look about him, found matter for astonishment in his own sensations. The cabin and the roadway outside, where the men sat patiently waiting their turns to ascend, had become almost homelike in his eyes. The lounging figures here thrown into relief by a score of lamps, there lost in the gloom of the background, had grown familiar. He knew that this was here and that was there, and had his recept-

acles and conveniences, his special attendants and helpers. In a word, he had made the place his own, yet without forgetting old habits—for more than once he caught himself looking at his watch, and wondering when it would be day.

Towards seven o'clock a message directed to him by name came down. A cage would be rigged up within the hour. Before that period elapsed, however, he was summoned to be present at the death of the poor fellow who had been delirious since he was found, and who now passed away in the same state. It was a trying scene, coming just when the clergyman's wrought-up nerves were beginning to feel a reaction—the more trying as all looked to him to do anything that could be done. But that was nothing; and he felt gravely thankful when the poor man's sufferings were over, and the throng of swarthy faces melted from the open doorway.

He sat apart a while after that, until a commotion outside the cabin and a cheery voice asking for Mr. Lindo summoned him to the door, where he found the manager who had sent him down the night before, and who now greeted him warmly. 'It is not for me to thank you,' Mr. Peat said—'I have nothing to do with this pit. The owner, to whom what has happened will be reported, will do that; but personally I am obliged to you, Mr. Lindo, and I am sure the men are.'

'I wanted only to be of help,' the clergyman answered simply. 'There was not much I could do.'

'Well, that is a matter of opinion,' the manager replied. 'I have mine, and I know that the men who have come up have theirs. However, here is the cage; perhaps you will not mind going up with poor Edwards?'

'Not at all,' said the rector; and, following

the manager to the cage, he stepped into it without any suspicion that this was a trick on the part of Mr. Peat to ensure his volunteer's services being recognised.

He found the ascent a very different thing from the descent. The steady upward motion was not unpleasant, and long before the surface was reached his eyes, accustomed to darkness, detected a pale gleam of light stealing downwards, and could distinguish the damp brickwork gliding by. Presently the light grew stronger—grew dazzling in its wonderful whiteness. ‘We are going up nicely,’ his companion murmured, remembering in his gratitude that the ascent, which was a trifle to him even with shattered nerves, might be unpleasant to the other—‘we are nearly there.’

And so they were ; and slowly and gently they rose into the broad daylight and the sunshine, which seemed to proclaim to the rector's

heart that sorrow may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning.

Standing densely packed round the pit's mouth was a great crowd—a crowd, at any rate, of many hundreds. They greeted the appearance of the cage with a quick drawing-in of the breath and a murmur of pity. Lindo's face and hands were as black as any collier's; his dress seemed at the first glance as theirs. But as he helped to lift his injured companion out and carry him to the stretcher which stood at hand, the word ran round who he was; and, though no one spoke, the loudest tribute would scarcely have been more eloquent than the respect with which the rough assemblage fell away to right and left that he might pass out to the gig which had been thoughtfully provided—first to carry him to the vicarage for a wash, and afterwards to take him home. His heart was full as he walked down the lane, every man standing

uncovered, and the women gazing on him with unspoken blessings in their eyes.

A very few hours before he had felt at war with the world. He had said, not perhaps that all men were liars, but that they were unjust, full of prejudice and narrowness and ill-will ; that, above all, they judged without charity. Now, as the pony-cart rattled down the road through the cutting, and the sunny landscape, the winding river, and the plain round Claversham opened before him, he felt far otherwise. He longed to do more for others than he had done. He dwelt with wonder on the gratitude which services so slight had evoked from men so rough as those from whom he had just parted. And unconsciously he placed the balance in their favour to the general account of the world, and acknowledged himself its debtor.

CHAPTER XXII

THE RECTOR'S DECISION

THE church clock was striking nine as the rector, jogging along behind the little pony, came in sight of the turnpike-house outside the town. He had no overcoat, and the drive had chilled him; and, anxious at once to warm himself and to reach the rectory as quietly as possible, he bade the driver stop at the gate and set him down. The lad had been strictly charged to see the parson home, and would have demurred, but Lindo persisted good-humouredly, and had his way. In two minutes he was striding briskly along the road, his shoulders squared, and the night's reflections still running like a rich

purple thread through the common stuff of his everyday thoughts.

In this mood, which the pure morning air and crisp sunshine tended to favour and prolong, he came at a corner plump upon Mr. Bonamy, who, like all angular uncomfortable men, was an early riser, and had this morning chosen to extend his before-breakfast walk in the direction of Baerton. The lawyer's energy had already been rewarded. He had met Mr. Keogh, and learned not only the earlier details of the accident—which were, indeed, known to all Claversham, for the town had sat up into the small hours listening for wheels and discussing the catastrophe—but had further received a minute description of the rector's conduct. Consequently his thoughts were already busy with the clergyman when, turning a corner, he came unexpectedly upon him.

Lindo met his glance and looked away hastily. The rector had been anxious to

avoid, by going home at once, any appearance of parading what he had done, and he would have passed on with a brief good-morning. But the lawyer seemed to be differently disposed. He stopped short in the middle of the path, so that the clergyman could not pass him without rudeness, and nodded a jerky greeting. 'You have not walked all the way, I suppose, Mr. Lindo?' he said, his keen small eyes reading the other's face like a book.

'No,' the rector answered, colouring uncomfortably under his gaze. 'I drove as far as the turnpike, Mr. Bonamy.'

'Well, you may think yourself lucky to be well out of it,' the lawyer rejoined with a dry smile. 'To be here at all, indeed,' he continued, with a gesture of the hand which seemed meant to indicate the sunshine and the upper air. 'When a man does a foolhardy thing he does not always escape, you know.'

The younger man reddened. But this morning he had his temper well under control; and he merely answered, 'I thought I was called upon to do what I did, Mr. Bonamy. But of course that is a matter of opinion. Perhaps I was wrong, perhaps right. I did what I thought best at the moment, and I am satisfied.'

Mr. Bonamy shrugged his shoulders. 'Oh, well, every man to his notion,' he said. 'I do not approve, myself, of people running risks which do not lie within the scope of their business. And as nothing has happened to you——'

'The risk of anything happening,' the rector rejoined, with warmth, 'was so small that the thing is not worth discussing, Mr. Bonamy. There is a matter, however,' he continued, changing the subject on a sudden impulse, 'which I think I may as well mention to you now as later. You, as churchwarden,

have, in fact, a right to be informed of it. I——’

‘You are cold,’ said Mr. Bonamy abruptly.
‘Allow me to turn with you.’

The rector bowed and complied. The request, however, had checked the current of his speech, even the current of his thoughts, and he did not finish his sentence. He felt, indeed, for a moment a temptation as sudden as it was strong. He saw at a glance what his resolve meant. He discerned that what had appeared to him in the isolation of the night an act of dignified self-surrender must, and would, seem to others an acknowledgment of defeat—almost an acknowledgment of dishonour. He recalled, as in a flash, all the episodes of the struggle between himself and his companion. And he pictured the latter’s triumph. He wavered.

But the events of the last eighteen hours had not been lost upon him, and, after a brief

hesitation, he set the seal on his purpose. 'You are aware, I know, Mr. Bonamy,' he said, with an effort, 'of the circumstances under which, in Lord Dynmore's absence, I accepted the living here.'

'Perfectly,' said the lawyer drily.

'He has made those circumstances the subject of a grave charge against me,' the rector continued, a touch of hauteur in his tone. 'That you have heard also, I know. Well, I desire to say once more that I repudiate that charge in the fullest and widest sense.'

'So I understand,' Mr. Bonamy murmured. He walked along by his companion's side, his face set and inscrutable. If he felt any surprise at the communication now being made to him he had the skill to hide it.

'I repudiate it, you understand!' the clergyman repeated, stepping out more quickly in his excitement, and glaring angrily

into vacancy. 'It is a false and wicked charge! But it does not affect me. I do not care a jot for it. It does not in any sense force me to do what I am going to do. If that were all, I should not dream of resigning the living, but, on the contrary, would hold it, as a few days ago I had determined to hold it, in the face of all opposition. However,' he continued, lowering his tone, 'I have now examined my position in regard to the parish rather than the patron, and I have come to a different conclusion, Mr. Bonamy—namely, to place my resignation in the proper hands as speedily as possible.'

Mr. Bonamy nodded gently and silently. He did not speak, he did not even look at the clergyman; and this placid acquiescence irritated the young man into adding a word he had not intended to say. 'I tell you this as my churchwarden, Mr. Bonamy,' he continued stiffly, 'and not as desiring or expect-

ing any word of sympathy or regret from you. On the contrary,' he added, with some bitterness, 'I am aware that my departure can be only a relief to you. We have been opposed to one another since my first day here.'

'Very true,' said Mr. Bonamy, nodding placidly. 'I suppose you have considered——'

'What?'

'The effect which last night's work may have on the relations between you and Lord Dynmore?'

'I do not understand you,' the rector answered haughtily, and yet with some wonder. What did the man mean?

'You know, I suppose,' Mr. Bonamy retorted, turning slightly so as to command a view of his companion's face, 'that he is the owner of the Big Pit at Baerton from which you have just come?'

‘Lord Dynmore is?’

‘To be sure.’

A flush of crimson swept over the rector’s brow and left him red and frowning. ‘I did not know that!’ he said, his teeth set together.

‘So I perceive,’ the lawyer replied, with a nod, as they turned into the churchyard. ‘But I can reassure you. It is not at all likely to affect the earl’s plans. He is an obstinate man, though in some points a good-natured one, and he will most certainly accept your resignation if you send it in. But here you are at home.’ He paused, standing awkwardly by the clergyman’s side. At last he added, ‘It is a comfortable house. I do not think that there is a more comfortable house in Claversham.’

He retired a few steps into the churchyard as he spoke, and stood looking up at the massive old-fashioned front of the rectory,

as if he had never seen the house before. The clergyman, anxious to be indoors and alone, shot an impatient glance at him, and waited for him to go. But he did not go, and presently something in his intent gaze drew Lindo, too, into the churchyard, and the two ill-assorted companions looked up together at the old grey house. The early sun shone aslant on it, burnishing the half-open windows. In the porch a robin was hopping to and fro. 'It is a comfortable, roomy house,' the lawyer repeated.

'It is,' the rector answered—slowly, as if the words were wrung from him. And he, too, stood looking up at it as if he were fascinated.

'A man might grow old in it,' murmured Mr. Bonamy. There was a slight, but very unusual, flush on his parchment-coloured face, and his eyes, when he turned with an abrupt movement to his companion, did not rise

above the latter's waistcoat. 'Comfortably too, I should say,' he added querulously, rattling the money in his pockets. 'I think if I were you I would reconsider my determination. I think I would, do you know? As it is, what you have told me will not go any farther. You did one foolish thing last night. I would not do another to-day, if I were you, Mr. Lindo.'

With that he turned abruptly away—his head down, his coat-tails swinging, and both his hands thrust deep into his trowser-pockets—such a shrewd, angular, ungainly figure as only a small country town can show. He left the rector standing before his rectory in a state of profound surprise and bewilderment. The young man felt something very like a lump in his throat as he turned to go in. He discerned that the lawyer had meant to do a kind, nay, a generous action; and yet if there was a man in the world whom he had judged

incapable of such magnanimity it was Mr. Bonamy ! He went in not only touched, but ashamed. Here, if he had not already persuaded himself that the world was less ill-conditioned than he had lately thought it, was another and a surprising lesson !

Meanwhile Mr. Bonamy went home in haste, and finding his family already at breakfast, sat down to the meal in a very snappish humour. The girls were quick to detect the cloud on his brow, and promptly supplied his wants, forbearing, whatever their curiosity, to make any present attempt to satisfy it. Jack was either less observant or more hardy. He remarked that Mr. Bonamy was late, and elicited only a grunt. A further statement that the morning was more like April than February gained no answer at all. Still undismayed, Jack tried again, plunging into the subject which the three had been discussing before the lawyer entered. ‘Did you hear

anything of Lindo, sir?' he asked, buttering his toast.

'I saw him,' the lawyer said curtly.

'Was he all right?' Jack ventured.

'More right than he deserved to be!' Mr. Bonamy snarled. 'What right had he down the pit at all? Gregg did not go.'

'More shame to Gregg, I think!' Jack said.

Mr. Bonamy prudently shifted his ground, and got back to the rector. 'Well, all I can say is that a more foolish, reckless, useless piece of idiocy I never heard of in my life!' he declared in a tone of scorn.

'I call it glorious!' said Daintry, looking dreamily across the table and slowly withdrawing an egg-spoon from her mouth. 'I shall never say anything against him again.'

Mr. Bonamy looked at her for an instant as if he would annihilate her. And then he went on with his breakfast.

Apparently, however, the outburst had relieved him, for presently he began on his own account. 'Has your friend any private means?' he asked, casting an ungracious glance at the barrister, and returning at once to his buttered toast.

'Who? Lindo, do you mean?' Jack replied in surprise.

'Yes.'

'Something, I should say. Perhaps a hundred a year. Why?'

'Because, if that is all he has,' the lawyer growled, buttering a fresh piece of toast and frowning at it savagely, 'I think that you had better see him and prevent him making a fool of himself. That is all.'

His tone meant more than his words expressed. Kate's eyes sought Jack's in alarm, only to be instantly averted. Though she had the urn before her, she turned red and white, and had to bury her face in her

cup to hide her discomposure. Yet she need not have feared. Mr. Bonamy was otherwise engaged, and as for Jack, her embarrassment told him nothing of which he was not already aware. He knew that his service was and must be a thankless and barren service—that to him fell the empty part of the slave in the triumph. Had he not within the last few hours—when the news that the rector had descended the Big Pit to tend the wounded and comfort the dying first reached the town, and a dozen voices were loud in his praise—had he not seen Kate's face now bright with triumph and now melting with tender anxiety? Had he not felt a bitter pang of jealousy as he listened to his friend's praises? and had he not crushed down the feeling manfully, bravely, heroically, and spoken as loudly, ay, and as cordially after an instant's effort, as the most fervent?

Yes, he had done all this and suffered

all this, being one of those who believe that

Loyalty is still the same,
Whether it win or lose the game :
True as the dial to the sun,
Although it be not shone upon.

And he was not going to flinch now. He put no more questions to Mr. Bonamy, but, when breakfast was finished, he got up and went out. It needed not the covert glance which he shot at Kate as he disappeared, to assure her that he was going about her unspoken errand.

Five minutes saw him face to face with the rector on the latter's hearthrug. Or, rather, to be accurate, five minutes saw him staring irate and astonished at his host while Lindo, with one foot on the fender and his eyes on the fire, seemed very willing to avoid his gaze. 'You have made up your mind to resign!' Jack exclaimed, in accents almost awe-stricken. 'You are joking!'

But the rector, still looking down, shook

his head. 'No, Jack, I am not,' he said slowly. 'I am in earnest.'

'Then may I ask when you came to this extraordinary resolution?' the barrister retorted hotly. 'And why?'

'Last night; and because—well, because I thought it right,' was the answer.

'You thought it right?'

Jack's tone was a fine mixture of wonder, contempt, and offence. It made Lindo wince, but it did not shake his resolution. 'Yes,' he said firmly. 'That is so.'

'And that is all you are going to tell me, is it? You put yourself in my hands a few days ago. You took my advice and acted upon it, and now, without a word of explanation, you throw me over! Good heavens! I have no patience with you!' In his indignation Jack began to walk up and down the room. 'Is not the position the same to-day as yesterday? Tell me that.'

‘Well,’ the rector began, turning and speaking slowly, ‘the truth is——’

‘No!’ cried the barrister, interrupting him ruthlessly. ‘Tell me this first. Is not the position the same to-day as yesterday?’

‘It is, but the view I take of it is different,’ the young clergyman answered earnestly. ‘Let me explain, Smith. When I agreed with you a few days ago that the proper course for me to follow, the course which would most fitly assert my honesty and good faith, was to retain the living in spite of threats and opposition, I had my own interests and my own dignity chiefly in view. I looked upon the question as one solely between Lord Dynmore and myself; and I felt, rightly as I still think, that, as a man falsely accused by another man, I had a right to repel the charge by the only practical means in my power—by maintaining my position and defying him to do his worst.’

He paused.

‘Well?’ said Jack drily.

But the rector did not continue at once, and when he did speak it was with evident effort. He first went back to the fire, and stood gazing into it in the old attitude, with his head slightly bowed and his foot on the fender. The posture was one of humility, and so far unlike the man, that it struck Jack and touched him strangely. At last Lindo did continue. ‘Well, you see,’ he said slowly, ‘that was all right as far as it went. My mistake lay in taking too narrow a view. I thought only of myself and Lord Dynmore, when I should have been thinking of the parish and of—a word I know you are not very fond of—the church. I should have remembered that with this accusation hanging over me I could not hope to do much good among my people; and that to many of them I should seem an interloper, a man clinging

obstinately to something not his own nor fairly acquired. In a word, I ought to have remembered that for the future I should be useless for good and might, on the other hand, become a stumbling-block and occasion for scandal—both inside the parish and outside. You see what I mean, I am sure.'

'I see,' quoth Jack contemptuously, 'that you need a great many words to make out your case. What I do not think you have considered is the inference which will be drawn from your resignation—you will be taken to have confessed yourself in the wrong.'

'I cannot help that.'

'Will not that be a scandal?'

'It will, at any rate, be one soon forgotten.'

'Now, I tell you what!' Jack exclaimed, standing still and confronting the other with

the air of a man bent on speaking his mind though the heavens should fall. 'This is just a piece of absurd Quixotism, Lindo. You are a poor man, without means and without influence; and you are going, for the sake of a foolish idea—a mere speculative scruple—to give up an income and a house and a useful sphere of work such as you will never get again! You are going to do that, and go back—to what? To a miserable curacy—don't wince, my friend, for that is what you are going to do—and an income one-fifth of that which you have been spending for the last six months! Now the sole question is, are you quite an idiot?'

'You are pretty plain-spoken,' said the rector, smiling feebly.

'I mean to be!' was Jack's uncompromising retort. 'I have asked you, and I want an answer—are you a fool?'

'I hope not.'

‘Then you will give up this fool’s notion?’
Jack replied viciously.

But the rector’s only answer was a shake of the head. He did not look round. Had he done so, he would have seen that, though Jack’s keen face was flushed with anger and annoyance, his eyes were moist and wore an expression very much at variance with his tone.

He missed that, however; and Jack made one more attempt. ‘Look here,’ he said bluntly: ‘have you considered that if you stop you will find your path a good deal smoothed by last night’s work?’

‘No, I have not,’ the rector answered stubbornly.

‘Well, you will find it so, you may be sure of that! Why, man alive!’ Jack continued with vehemence, ‘you are going to be the hero of the place for the time. No one will believe anything against you, except

perhaps Gregg and a few beasts of his kind. Whereas, if you go now, do you know who will get your berth ? ’

‘No.’

Jack rapped out the name. ‘Clode ! Clode, and no one else, I will be bound ! ’ he said. ‘And you do not love him.’

The rector had not expected the reply. He started, and, removing his foot from the fender, turned sharply so as to face his friend. ‘No,’ he said slowly and reluctantly, ‘I do not think I do like him. I consider that he has behaved badly, Jack. He has not stood by me as he should have done, or as I would have stood by him had our positions been reversed. I do not think he has called here once since the bazaar, except on business, and then I was out. I had planned, indeed, to see him to-day and ask him what it meant, and, if I found he had come to an adverse opinion in my matter, to give him notice. But now——’

‘You will make him a present of the living instead,’ Jack said grimly.

‘I do not know why he should get it,’ the rector answered, with a frown, ‘more than anyone else.’

‘It is the common report that he will,’ Jack retorted. ‘As for that, however——’

But why follow him through all the resources of his art? He put forth every effort—perhaps against his own better judgment, for a man will do for his friend what he will not do for himself—to persuade the rector to recall his decision. And he failed. He succeeded, indeed, in wringing the young clergyman’s heart and making him wince at the thought of his barren future and his curate’s triumph; but there his success ended. He made no progress towards inducing him to change his mind; and presently he found that all the arguments he advanced were met by a set formula, to

which the rector seemed to cling as in self-defence.

‘It is no good, Jack,’ he answered—and if he said it once, he said it half a dozen times—‘it is no good! I cannot take any one’s advice on this subject. The responsibility is mine, and I cannot shift it! I must try to do right according to my own conscience!’

Jack did not know that the words were Kate’s, and that every time the rector repeated them he had Kate in his mind. But he saw that they were unanswerable; and when he had listened to them for the sixth time he took up his hat in a huff. ‘Well, have your own way!’ he said, turning away. ‘After all, you are right. It is your business and not mine. Give Clode the living if you like!’

And he went out sharply.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE CURATE HEARS THE NEWS

SELDOM, if ever, had the curate passed a week so harassing as that which was ushered in by the bazaar, and was destined to end—though he did not know this—in the colliery accident. During these seven days he managed to run through a perfect gamut of feelings. He rose each day in a different mood. 'One day he was hopeful, confident, assured of success; the next fearful, despondent, inclined to give up all for lost. One day he went about telling himself that the rector would not resign; that he would not himself resign in his place; that people were mad to say he would; that men do not resign livings

so easily ; that the very circumstances of the case must compel the rector to stand his ground. The next he saw everything in a different light. He appreciated the impossibility of a man attacked on so many sides maintaining his position for any length of time ; and counted the rector's cause as lost already. One hour he bitterly regretted that he had cut himself off from his chief ; the next he congratulated himself as sincerely on being untrammelled by any but a formal bond. Why, people might even have expected him, had he strongly supported the rector, to refuse the living !

He saw Laura several times during the week, but he did not open to her the extent of his hopes and fears. He shrank from doing so out of a natural prudent reticence ; which after all meant only the refraining from putting into words things perfectly understood by both. To some extent he kept up

between them the thin veil of appearances, which many who go through life in closest companionship preserve to the end, though each has long ago found it transparent. But though he said nothing, confining the tumult of his feelings to his own breast, he was not blind, and he soon perceived that Laura shared his suspense, and was watching the rector's fortunes with an interest as selfish and an eye as cold as his own. Which, far from displeasing him, rather increased his ardour.

As the days passed by, however, bringing only the sickness of hope deferred and tidings of the rector's sturdy determination to hold what he had got, the curate began, not in a mere passing mood, but, on grounds of reason and calculation, to lose hope. Every tongue in the town was wagging about Lindo. My lord was, or was supposed to be, setting the engines of the law in motion. Mr. Bonamy

was believed, probably with less reason, to be contemplating an appeal to the bishop and the Court of Arches. In a word, all the misfortunes which Clode had foreseen were accumulating about the devoted head; and yet—and yet it was a question whether the owner of the head was a penny the worse! Perhaps some day he might be. The earl was a great man, with a long purse, and he might yet have his way. But this was not likely to happen, as the curate now began to see, until long after the Rev. Stephen Clode's connection with the parish and claim upon the living should have become things of the past.

On the top of this conviction, which sufficiently depressed him, came the news of the colliery accident—news which did not reach him until late at night. It plunged him into the depths of despair. He cursed the ill-luck which had withheld from him the opportunity

of distinguishing himself, and had granted it to the rector. He saw how fatally the affair would strengthen the latter's hands. And in effect he gave up. He resigned himself to despair. He had not the spirit to go out, but sat until long after noon, brooding miserably over the fire, his table littered with unremoved breakfast things, and his mind in a similar state of slovenly disorder. That was a day, a miserable day, he long remembered.

About half-past two he made an effort to pull himself together. Mechanically putting a book in his pocket, he took his hat and went out, with the intention of paying two or three visits in his district. He had pride enough left to excite him to the effort, and sufficient sense to recognise its supreme importance. But, even so, before he reached the street he was dreaming again—the old dreary dreams. He started when a voice behind him said brusquely, ‘Going your

rounds, I see! Well, there is nothing like sticking to business, whatever is on foot. Shall I have to congratulate you this time?’

He knew the voice and turned round, a scowl on his dark face. The speaker was Gregg—Gregg wearing an air of unusual jauntiness and gaiety. It fell from him, however, as he met the curate’s eyes, leaving him, metaphorically speaking, naked and ashamed. The doctor stood in wholesome dread of the curate’s sharp tongue and biting irony, nor would he have accosted him in so free-and-easy a manner now, had he not been a little lifted above himself by something he had just learned.

‘Congratulate me? What do you mean?’ Clode replied, turning on him with the uncompromising directness which is more ‘upsetting’ to a man uncertain of himself than any retort, however discourteous.

‘What do I mean?’ the doctor answered,

striving to cover his discomfiture with a feeble smile. 'Well, no harm, at any rate, Clode. I hope I shall have to congratulate you. But if you are going to——'

'On what?' interrupted the curate sternly.

'On what are you going to congratulate me?'

'Haven't you heard the news?' Gregg said in surprise.

'What news? Of the pit accident?'

Clode answered, restraining with difficulty a terrible outburst of passion. 'Why I should think there is not a fool within three counties has not heard it by this time!'

He almost swore at the man, and was turning away, when something in the doctor's 'No, no!' struck him, excited as he was, as peculiar. 'Then, what is it?' he said, hanging on his heel, half curious and half in scorn.

'You have not heard about the rector?'

The curate glared. 'About the rector?'

he said in a mechanical way. A sudden stillness fell on his face and tone at mention of the name. 'No, what of him?' he continued, after another pause.

'You have not heard that he is resigning?' Gregg asked.

The curate's eyes flashed with returning anger. 'No,' he said grimly. 'Nor anyone else out of Bedlam!'

'But it is so! It is true, I tell you!' the doctor answered in the excitement of conviction. 'I have just seen a man who had it from the archdeacon, who left the rectory not an hour ago. He is going to resign at once.'

The curate did not again deny the truth of the story. But he seemed to Gregg watching eagerly for some sign of appreciation, to take the news coolly, considering how important it was to him. He stood silent a moment, looking thoughtfully down the street, and then shrugged his shoulders. That was all.

Gregg did not see the little pulse which began to beat so furiously and suddenly in his cheek, nor hear the buzzing which for a few seconds rendered him deaf to the shrill cries of the schoolboys playing among the pillars of the market hall.

‘Mr. Lindo has changed his mind since yesterday, then,’ Clode said at last, speaking in his ordinary rather contemptuous tone.

‘Yes, I heard he was talking big then,’ replied the doctor, delighted with his success. ‘Defying the earl, and all the rest of it. That was quite in his line. But I never heard that much came of his talking. However, you are bound to stick up for him, I suppose!’

The curate frowned a little at that—why, the doctor did not understand—and then the two parted. Gregg went on his way to carry the news to others, and Clode, after standing a moment in thought, turned his steps towards the Town House. The sky had grown cloudy,

the day cold and raw. The leafless avenue and silent shrubberies through which he strode presented but a wintry prospect to the common eye, but for him the air was full of sunshine and green leaves and the songs of birds. From despair to hope, from a prison to a palace, he had leapt at a single bound. In the first intoxication of confidence he could even spare a moment to regret that his hands were not *quite* clean. He felt a passing remorse for the doing of one or two things, as needless, it now turned out, as they had been questionable. Nay, he could afford to shudder, with a luxurious sense of danger safely passed, at the risks he had been so foolish as to run ; thanking Providence that his folly had not landed him, as he now saw that it easily might have landed him, in such trouble as would have effectually tripped up his rising fortunes.

He reached the Town House in a perfect glow of moral worth and self-gratulation

and he was already half-way across the drawing-room before he perceived that it contained, besides Mrs. Hammond and her daughter, a third person. The third person was the rector. Except in church the two men had not met since the day of the bazaar, and both were unpleasantly surprised. Lindo rose slowly from a seat in one of the windows, and, without stepping forward, stood silently looking at his curate, as one requiring an explanation, not offering a greeting; while Clode felt something of a shock, for he discerned at once that the situation would admit of no half measures. In the presence of Mrs. Hammond, to whom he had expressed his view of the rector's conduct, he could not adopt the cautious apologetic tone which he would probably have used had he met Lindo alone. He was fairly caught. But he was not a coward, and before the tell-tale flush had well mounted to his brow he had determined on

his *rôle*. Half-way across the room he stopped, and looked at Mrs. Hammond. 'I thought you were alone,' he said with an air of constraint, partly real, partly assumed.

'There is only the rector here,' she answered bluntly. And then she added, with a little spice of malice, for Mr. Clode had not been a favourite with her since his defection, 'I suppose you are not afraid to meet him?'

'Certainly not,' the curate answered, thus challenged. And he turned haughtily to meet the rector's angry gaze. 'I am not aware that I have any need to be. I am glad to see that you are none the worse for your gallant conduct last night,' he added with perfect *aplomb*.

'Thank you,' Lindo answered, choking down his indignation with an effort. For a week—for a whole week—this, his chosen lieutenant, had not been near him in his trouble! 'I am much obliged to you,' he

continued, 'but I am rather surprised that your anxiety on my account did not lead you to come and see me at the rectory.'

'I called, and failed to find you,' Clode answered, sitting resolutely down.

Lindo followed his example. 'I believe you did once,' he replied contemptuously. Had a friend been about to succeed him, he could have borne even to congratulate him. But the thought of this man entering on the enjoyment of all the good things he was resigning was well-nigh unendurable. Though he knew that it would best consort with his dignity to be silent, he could not refrain from pursuing the subject. 'You thought,' he went on, the same gibe in his tone, 'that a non-committal policy was best, I suppose?'

The curate for a moment sat silent, his dark face glowing with resentment. 'If you mean,' he said at last, neither Mrs. Hammond nor her daughter venturing to interfere—the

former because she thought he was only getting his deserts, and the latter because she felt no call to champion him at present—‘if you mean that I did not wish to publish my opinion, you are right, Mr. Lindo.’

‘I think you published it sufficiently for your purpose!’ the young rector retorted with bitterness.

‘Then why throw my non-committal policy in my teeth?’ replied the curate deftly. Thereby winning at least a logical victory.

Lindo sneered and grew, of course, twice as angry as before. ‘Very neatly put!’ he said. ‘I do not doubt that you would have got out of your confession of faith—or lack of faith—as cleverly, if circumstances had required it.’

The words were scarcely out of his mouth before Miss Hammond rose in a marked way and left the room; while Clode for a moment glared at him as though he would resent the

insult—for it was little less—in a practical manner. Fortunately the curate's calculating brain told him that nothing could be gained by this, and with an admirable show of patience and forbearance he waved the words aside. 'I really do not understand you,' he said with a maddening air of superiority. 'I cannot be blamed for having formed an opinion of my own on a subject which affected me. Then, having formed it, what was I to do? Publish it, or keep it to myself? As a fact, I did not publish it.'

'Except by your acts,' said the rector.

'Take it that way, then,' the curate replied, still with patience. 'Do I gather that you would have had me, though I held an opinion adverse to you, come to you as before, be about you, treat you in all respects as if I were on your side? Is that your complaint? That I did not play the hypocrite?'

The rector felt that he was fairly defeated and out-manœuvred ; so much so that Mrs. Hammond, whose sympathies were entirely on his side, expected him to break into a furious passion. But the very skill and coolness of his adversary acted as a warning and an example, and by a mighty effort he controlled himself. He rose from his chair with outward calmness, and, saying contemptuously, ‘ Well, I am glad that I know what your opinion is—an open foe is less dangerous than a secret one,’ he turned from Clode. Holding out his hand to his hostess, he muttered some form of leave-taking, and walked out of the room with as much dignity as he could muster. He had certainly had the worst of the encounter.

And he felt very bitter about it, as he crossed the top of the town. Whether the curate knew of his intention of resigning or not, his conduct in turning upon him and

openly expressing his disbelief in his honesty was alike cruel and brutal. The man was false. The rector felt sure of it. But the pain which he experienced on this account—the pain of a generous man misunderstood and ill-requited—soon gave way to self-reproach. He had brought the thing on himself by his indiscreet passion. He had acted like a boy! He was not fit to be in a responsible position!

While he was still full of this, chewing the cud of his imprudence, he saw a slender figure, which he recognised, crossing the street a little way before him. He knew it at the first glance. In a moment he recognised the graceful lines, the half proud, half-gentle carriage of the head, the glint of the cold February sun in the fair hair. It was Kate Bonamy; and the rector, as he increased his pace, became conscious, with something like a shock, of the pleasure it gave him to

see her, though he had parted from her not twenty-four hours before. In a moment he was at her side, and she, turning suddenly, saw him with a start of glad surprise. 'Mr. Lindo!' she stammered, holding out her hand before he offered his, and uttering the first words which rose to her lips, 'I am so glad!'

She was thinking of the pit accident, of the risk and his safety, and perhaps a little of his good name. And he understood. But he affected not to do so. 'Are you indeed, Miss Bonamy?' he answered. 'Glad that I am going?'

His eyes met hers, and then both his and hers fell. 'No,' she said gently and slowly. 'But I am very glad, Mr. Lindo, that you have done what seemed right to you without considering your own advantage.'

'I have done a great deal since I saw you yesterday,' he answered, taking refuge in a jest.

‘You have, indeed.’

‘Including taking your advice.’

‘I am quite sure you had made up your mind before you asked my opinion,’ she answered earnestly.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I am sure I had not. It was your hint which led me to think the position out from the beginning. When I did so it struck me that, irritated by Lord Dynmore’s words and manner, I had considered the question only as it affected him and myself. Going on to think of the parish, I came to the conclusion that I was quite unfit for the position.’

Kate started. The end of his sentence was a surprise to her. They were walking along side by side now—very slowly—and she looked at him, mute interrogation in her eyes.

‘I am too young,’ he said. ‘Your father, you know, was of that opinion from the first.’

‘Oh, but ’—she answered hurriedly, ‘I—’

‘You do not think so?’ he said with a droll glance. ‘Well, I am glad of that. What? You were not going to say that, Miss Bonamy?’

‘No,’ she answered, blushing. ‘I was going to say that my father’s opinion might not now be the same, Mr. Lindo.’

‘I expect it is. However, the opinion on which I acted was my own. I have a very hasty temper, do you know. This very afternoon I have been quarrelling, and have put my foot into it! I confess I thought when I came here that I could manage. Now I see I am not fit for it—for the living, I mean.’

‘Perhaps,’ she answered slowly and in a low voice, ‘you are the more fit because you feel unfit.’

‘Well, I do not think I dare act on that,’ he cried gaily. ‘So you now see before you, Miss Bonamy, a very humble personage—a kind of clerical man-of-all-work out of place!’

You do not know an incumbent of easy temper who wants a curate, do you ? ’

He spoke lightly, without any air of seeking or posing for admiration. Yet there was a little inflection of bitterness in his voice which did not escape her ear, and perhaps spoke to it—and to her heart—more loudly, because it was not intended for either. She suddenly looked at him, and her face quivered, and then she looked away. But he had seen and understood. He marked the colour rising to the roots of her hair, and was as sure as if he had seen them that her eyes were wet with tears.

And then he knew. He felt a sudden answering yearning towards her, a forgetfulness of all her surroundings, and of all his surroundings save herself alone. What a fool, what an ingrate, what a senseless clod he had been, not to have seen months before—when it was in his power to win her, when he

might have asked for something besides her pity, when he had something to offer her—that she was the fairest, purest, noblest of women! Now, when it was too late, and he had sacrificed all to a stupid conventionality, a social prejudice—what was her father to her save the natural crabbed foil of her grace and beauty—now he felt that he would give all, only he had nothing to give, to see her wide grey eyes grow dark with tenderness, and—and love.

Yes, love. That was it. He knew now. ‘Miss Bonamy,’ he said hurriedly. ‘Will you——’

Kate started. ‘Here is my cousin,’ she said quietly, and yet with suspicious abruptness. ‘I think he is looking for me, Mr. Lindo.’

CHAPTER XXIV

THE CUP AT THE LIP

THE ten days which followed the events just described were long remembered in Claversham with fondness and regret. The accident at Baerton, and the strange position of affairs at the rectory, falling out together, created intense excitement in the town. The gossips had for once as much to talk about as the idlest could wish, and found, indeed, so much to say on the one side and the other that the grocer, it was rumoured, ordered in a fresh supply of tea, and the two bakers worked double tides at making crumpets and Sally Luns, and still lagged behind the demand. Old Peggy from the almshouse hung about

the churchyard half the day, noting who called at the rector's, and took as much interest in her task as if her weekly dole had depended on Mr. Lindo's fortunes. While everyone who could lay the least claim to knowing more than his neighbours became for the time the object of as many attentions as a London belle.

The archdeacon drove in and out daily. Once the rumour got abroad that he had gone to see Lord Dynmore; and more than once it was said that he was away at the palace conferring with the bishop. Those most concerned walked the streets with the faces of sphinxes. The curate and the rector were known to be on the most distant terms; and to put an edge on curiosity, already keen, Mrs. Hammond was twice seen talking to Mr. Bonamy in the street.

Even the poor colliers' funeral, though a great number of the townsmen trooped out to

the bleak little churchyard on Baer Hill to witness it—and to be rewarded by the sight of the young rector reading the service in the midst of a throng of bareheaded pitmen such as no Claversham eye had ever seen before—even this, which in ordinary times would have furnished food for talk for a month at least, went for little now. It was discussed indeed for an evening, and then recalled only for the sake of the light which it was supposed to throw upon Mr. Lindo's fate.

That gentleman, indeed, continued to present to the public an unmoved face. But in private, in the seclusion of his study—the lordly room which he had prized and appreciated from the first, taking its spacious dignity as the measure of his success—he wore no mask. There he had—as all men have, the man of destiny and the conscript alike—his solitary hours of courage and depression, anxiety and resignation. Of hope

also; for even now—let us not paint him greater than he was—he clung to the possibility that Lord Dynmore, whom everyone agreed in describing as irascible and hasty, but generous at bottom, would refuse to receive his resignation of the living, and this in such terms as would enable him to remain without sacrificing his self-respect. There would be a victory indeed, and at times he could not help dwelling on the thought of it.

Consequently, when Mrs. Baxter, four days after the funeral, ushered in the archdeacon, and the young rector, turning at his writing-table, read his fate in the old gentleman's eyes, the news came upon him with crushing weight. Yet he did not give way. He rose and welcomed his visitor with a brave face. 'So the bearer of the bow-string has come at last!' he said lightly, as the two met on the hearthrug.

The archdeacon held his hand a few seconds longer than was necessary. 'Yes,' he said, 'I am afraid that is about what I am. I am sorry to bring you such news, Lindo—more sorry than I can tell you.' And, having got so far, he dropped his hat and picked it up again in a great hurry, and for a moment did not look at his companion.

'After all,' the rector said manfully, 'it is the only news I had a right to expect.'

'There is something in that,' the archdeacon admitted, sitting down. 'That is so, perhaps. All the same,' he went on, looking about him unhappily, and rubbing his head in ill-concealed irritation, 'if I had known how the earl would take it, I should not have advised you to make any concessions. No, I should not. But, there, he is an odd man—odder than I thought.'

'He accepts my offer to resign, of course?'

'Yes.'

‘And that is all?’ the rector said, a little huskiness in his tone.

‘That is all,’ the archdeacon replied, rubbing his head again. It was plain that he had hard work to keep his vexation within bounds.

‘Well, I must not complain because he has taken me at my word,’ the rector said, recovering himself a little.

‘Well, I hoped the bishop might have had a word to say to it,’ the archdeacon grumbled. ‘But he had not, and I could not get to see his wife. He spoke very highly of your conduct, but he did not see his way clear, he said, to interfering.’

‘I scarcely see how he could,’ Lindo answered slowly.

‘Well, I do not know. Bonamy’s representation in the churchwardens’ names was very strong—very strong indeed, coming from them, you know.’

Lindo reddened. 'There is an odd man for you, if you like,' he said impulsively. He was glad, perhaps, to change the subject. 'He has scarcely said a civil word to me since I came. He even began an action against me. Yet when this happened he turned round and in his way fought for me.'

'Well, that is Bonamy all over!' the archdeacon answered, almost with enthusiasm. 'He is rough and crabbed, but he has the instincts of a gentleman, which are the greater credit to him, since he is a self-made man. I think I can tell you something about him, though, which you do not know.'

'Indeed?' said Lindo mechanically.

'Yes. It has to do with your letter, too. I had it from Lord Dynmore. In the first flush of his anger, it seems, he went to Bonamy and directed him to take the necessary steps to eject you. He is not the earl's solicitor, and he must have seen an excellent

opportunity of getting hold of the Dymore business through this. He could not but see it. Nevertheless, he declined.'

'Why?' the rector asked shortly.

The archdeacon shrugged his shoulders. 'Ah! that I cannot say,' he answered. 'I only know that he did, putting forward some scruple or other which sent the earl off almost foaming with rage; and, of course, sent off with him Bonamy's chance of his business.'

'He is a strange man!' Lindo sighed as he spoke.

The archdeacon took a turn up the room. 'Now,' he said, coming back, 'I want to talk to you about another man.'

'Clode?' the rector muttered.

'Well, yes; you have guessed it,' the elder clergyman assented. 'The truth is, I am to offer him the living if you report well of him.'

'I do not like him,' Lindo said briefly.

‘To be candid,’ replied the other as briefly, ‘neither do I, now.’

To that Lindo for a moment said nothing. The young man had fallen into an old attitude, and stood with his foot on the fender, his head bent, his eyes fixed on the fire. His eyes grew hard, the line of his lips lengthened. He was passing through a temptation. Here was a brave vengeance ready to his hand. The man who had behaved badly, heartlessly, disloyally to him, who had taken part against him, and been hard and unfriendly from the moment of Lord Dynmore’s return, was now in his power. He had only to say that he distrusted Clode, that he suspected him of being unscrupulous, even that their connection had not been satisfactory to himself—and the thing was done. Clode would not have the living.

Yet he hesitated to say those words. He felt that the thing was a temptation. He

remembered that Clode had worked well in the parish, and that his only offence was a private one. And, not at once, but after a pause, he gulped down the temptation, and, looking up with a flushed face, spoke. 'Yes,' he said, 'I must report well of him—in the parish, that is. He is a good worker. I am bound to say as much as that, I think.'

The archdeacon shrugged his shoulders once more. 'Right!' he said, with a certain curtness which hid his secret disgust. 'I suppose that is all, then. Will you come with me and tell him?'

'No,' the rector answered very decidedly, 'certainly I will not.'

'It will look well,' the other still suggested.

'No,' Lindo replied again, almost in anger, 'I cannot sincerely congratulate the man, and I will not!'

Nor would he budge from that resolve; and when the archdeacon called at the curate's

lodgings a few minutes later, he called alone. The man he sought was out, however. 'Mr. Clode is at the Reading-Room, I think, sir,' the landlady said, with her deepest curtsy. And thither, accordingly, after a moment's hesitation, the archdeacon went.

The gas in the big, barely furnished room, which we have visited more than once, had just been lit, but the blinds still remained up; and in this mingling of lights the place looked less home-like and more uncomfortable than usual. There were three people in the room when the archdeacon entered. Two sat reading by the fire, their backs to the door. The third—the future rector—was standing up near one of the windows, taking advantage of the last rays of daylight to read the 'Times,' which he held open before him. The archdeacon cast a casual glance at the others, and then stepped across to him and touched him on the shoulder.

Clode turned with a start. He had not heard the approaching footstep. One glance at the new-comer's face, however, set his blood in a glow. It told him, or almost told him, all; and instinctively he dropped his eyes, that the other might not read in them his triumph and exultation.

The archdeacon's first words confirmed him in his hopes. 'I have some good news for you, Mr. Clode,' he said, smiling benevolently. He had of late distrusted the curate, as we have seen; but he was a man of kindly nature, and such a man cannot convey good tidings without entering into the recipient's feelings. 'I saw Lord Dynmore yesterday,' he continued.

'Indeed,' said the curate a little thickly. His face had grown hot, but the increasing darkness concealed this.

'Yes,' the archdeacon resumed, in a confidential tone which was yet pretty audible

through the room. 'You have heard, no doubt, that Mr. Lindo has resigned the living?'

The curate nodded. At that moment he dared not speak. A dreadful thought was in his mind. What if the archdeacon's good news was news that the earl declined to receive the resignation? Some people might call that good news! The mere thought struck him dumb.

The archdeacon's next words resolved his doubts. 'Frankly,' the elder man continued in a genial tone, 'I am sorry—sorry that circumstances have forced him to take so extreme a step. But having said that, Mr. Clode, I have done for the present with regret, and may come to pleasanter matter. I have to congratulate you. I am happy to say that Lord Dynmore, whom I saw yesterday, has authorised me to offer the living to you.'

The newspaper rustled in the curate's

grasp, and for a moment he did not answer. Then he said huskily, 'To me?'

'Yes,' the archdeacon answered expansively—it was certainly a pleasant task he had in hand, and he could not help beaming over it. 'To you, Mr. Clode. On one condition only,' he continued, 'which is usual enough in all such cases, and I venture to think is particularly natural in this case. I mean that you have your late rector's good word.'

'Mr. Lindo's good word?' the curate stammered.

'Of course,' the unconscious archdeacon answered.

The curate's jaw dropped; but by an effort he forced a ghastly smile. 'To be sure,' he said. 'There will be no difficulty about that, I think.'

'No,' replied the other, 'for I have just seen him, and can say at once that he is

prepared to give it you. He has behaved throughout in a most generous manner, and the consequence is that I have nothing more to do except to offer you my congratulations on your preferment.'

For a moment Clode could scarcely believe in his happiness. In the short space of two minutes he had tasted to the full both the pleasure of hope and the pang of despair. Could it be that all that was over already? That the period of waiting and uncertainty was past and gone? That the prize to which he had looked so long—and with the prize the woman he loved—was his at last?—was actually in his grasp?

His head reeled, great as was his self-control, and a haze rose before his eyes. As this passed away he became conscious that the archdeacon was shaking his hand with great heartiness, and that the thing was real! He was rector, or as good as rector, of Claver-

sham. The object of his ambition was his ! He was happy : perhaps it was the happiest moment of his life. He had even time to wonder whether he could not do Lindo a good turn—whether he could not somehow make it up to him.

‘ You are very good,’ he muttered, gratefully pressing the archdeacon’s hand.

‘ I am glad it is not a stranger,’ that gentleman replied heartily. ‘ Oh,’ he continued, turning suddenly and speaking in a different tone, ‘ is that you, Mr. Bonamy ? Well, there can be no harm in your hearing the news also. You are people’s warden, of course, and have a kind of claim to hear it early. To be sure you have.’

‘ What is the news ?’ Mr. Bonamy asked rather shortly. He had risen and drawn near unnoticed, Jack Smith behind him. ‘ Do I understand that Lord Dynmore has accepted the rector’s resignation ?’

‘That is so.’

‘And that he proposes to present Mr. Clode?’ the lawyer continued, looking hard at the curate as he named him.

‘Precisely,’ replied the archdeacon, without hesitation.

‘I hope you have no objection, Mr. Bonamy,’ the curate said, bowing slightly with a gracious air. He could afford to be gracious now. He even felt good—as men in such moments do.

But in the lawyer’s response there was no graciousness, nor much apparent goodness. ‘I am afraid,’ he said, standing up gaunt and stiff, with a scowl on his face, ‘that I must take advantage of that saving clause, Mr. Clode. I am people’s warden, as the archdeacon says, and I may not improperly claim to have some interest in this, and frankly I object to your appointment—to your appointment as rector here.’

‘You object!’ the curate stammered, between wrath and wonder.

‘Bless me!’ the archdeacon exclaimed in unmixed astonishment. ‘This is quite out of order. What do you mean?’

‘Just what I say. I object,’ repeated the lawyer firmly. This time Clode said nothing, but his eyes flashed, and he drew himself up, his face dark with passion. ‘Shall I state my objection now?’ Mr. Bonamy continued, with the utmost gravity. ‘It is not quite formal, but—very well, I will do so. I have rather a curious story to tell, and I must go back a short time. When Mr. Lindo’s honesty in accepting the living was first called in question about a month ago, he referred to the letters in which Lord Dynmore’s agents conveyed the offer to him. He had those letters by him. Naturally, he had preserved them with care, and he began to regard them in the light of valuable evidence on his behalf,

since they showed the facts brought to his knowledge when he accepted the living. I have said that he had preserved them with care; and, indeed, he is prepared to say to-day, that from the time of his arrival here until now, they have never, with his knowledge or consent, passed out of his possession.'

The lawyer's rasping voice ceased for a moment. Stephen Clode's face was a shade paler, but away from the gas-jets this could not be distinguished. He was arming himself to meet whatever shock was to come, while below this voluntary action of the brain his mind ran in an undercurrent of fierce passionate anger against himself—anger that he had ever meddled with those fatal letters. Oh, the folly, the uselessness, the danger of that act, as he saw them now!

'Nevertheless,' Mr. Bonamy resumed in the same even, pitiless tone, 'when Mr. Lindo

referred to these letters—which he kept, I should add, in a locked cupboard in his library—he found that the first in date, and the most important of them all, had been mutilated.’

The curate’s brow cleared. ‘What on earth,’ he broke out, ‘has this to do with me, Mr. Bonamy?’ And he laughed—a laugh of relief and triumph. The lawyer’s last words had lifted a weight from his heart. They had found a mare’s nest after all.

‘Quite so!’ the archdeacon chimed in with good-natured fussiness. ‘What has all this to do with the matter in hand, or with Mr. Clode, Mr. Bonamy? I fail to see.’

‘In a moment I will show you,’ the lawyer answered. Then he paused, and, taking a letter-case from his pocket, leisurely extracted from it a small piece of paper. ‘I will first ask Mr. Clode,’ he continued, ‘to tell us if

he supplied Mr. Lindo with the names of a firm of Birmingham solicitors.'

'Certainly I did,' replied the curate haughtily.

'And you gave him their address, I think?'

'I did.'

'Perhaps you can tell me, then, whether that is the address you wrote for him,' continued the lawyer smoothly, as he held out the paper for the curate's inspection.

'It is,' Clode answered at once. 'I wrote it for Mr. Lindo, in my own room, and gave it him there. But I fail to see what all this has to do with the point you have raised,' he continued with considerable heat.

'It has just this to do with it, Mr. Clode,' the lawyer answered drily, a twinkle in his eyes—'that this address is written on the reverse side of the very piece of paper which is missing from Mr. Lindo's letter—the im-

portant letter I have described. And I wish to ask you, and I think it will be to your interest to give as clear an answer to the question as possible, how you came into possession of this scrap of paper.'

The curate glared at his questioner. 'I do not understand you,' he stammered. And he held out his hand for the paper.

'I think you will when you look at both sides of the sheet,' replied the lawyer, handing it to him. 'On one side there is the address you wrote. On the other are the last sentence and signature of a letter from Messrs. Gearn & Baker to Mr. Lindo. The question is a very simple one. How did you get possession of this piece of paper?'

Clode was silent—silent, though he knew that the archdeacon was looking at him, and that a single hearty spontaneous denial might avert suspicion. He stood holding the paper in his hand, and gazing stupidly at the

damning words, utterly unable to comprehend for the moment how they came to be there. Little by little, however, as the benumbing effects of the surprise wore off, his thoughts went back to the evening when the address was written, and he remembered how the rector had come in and surprised him, and how he had huddled away the letters. In his disorder, no doubt, he had left one lying among his own papers, and made the fatal mistake of tearing from it the scrap on which he had written the address.

He saw it all as he stood there, still gazing at the piece of paper, while his rugged face grew darkly red and then again a miserable sallow, and the perspiration sprang out upon his forehead. He felt that the archdeacon's eyes were upon him, that the archdeacon was waiting for him to speak. He saw the mistake he had made, but his brain, usually so

ready, failed to supply him with the explanation he required.

‘You understand?’ Mr. Bonamy said slowly. ‘The question is, how this letter came to be in your room that evening, Mr. Clode. That is the question.’

‘I cannot say,’ he answered huskily. He was so shaken by the unexpected nature of the attack, and by the strange and ominous way in which the evidence against him had arisen, that he had not the courage to look up and face his accuser. ‘I think—nay, I am sure, indeed—that the rector must have given me the paper,’ he explained, after an awkward pause.

‘He is positive he did not,’ Mr. Bonamy answered.

Then Clode recovered himself and looked up. After all, it was only his word against another’s. ‘Possibly he is,’ he said, ‘and yet he may be mistaken. I cannot otherwise

see how the paper could have come into my hands. You do not really mean,' he continued with a smile, which was almost easy, 'to charge me with stealing the letter, I suppose?'

'Well, to be quite candid, I do,' Mr. Bonamy replied curtly. Nor was this unexpected slap in the face rendered more tolerable by the qualification he hastened to add—'or getting it stolen.'

The curate started. 'This is not to be borne,' he cried hotly. He looked at the archdeacon as if expecting him to interfere. But he found that gentleman's face grave and troubled, and, seeing he must expect no help from him at present, he continued, 'Do you dare to make so serious an accusation on such evidence as this, Mr. Bonamy?'

'On that,' the lawyer replied, pointing to the paper, 'and on other evidence besides.'

The curate flinched. Had they found

Felton, the earl's servant? Had they any more scraps of paper—any more self-wrought damning evidence of that kind? It was only by an effort, which was apparent to one at least of his hearers, that he gathered himself together, and answered, with a show of promptitude and ease, 'Other evidence? What, I ask? Produce it!'

'Here it is,' said Mr. Bonamy, pointing to Jack Smith, who had been standing at his elbow throughout the discussion.

'What has he to do with it?' Clode muttered with dry lips.

'Only this,' the barrister said quietly, addressing himself to the archdeacon. 'That some time ago I saw Mr. Clode replace a packet in the cupboard in the rector's library. He only discovered my presence in the room when the cupboard door was open, and his agitation on observing me struck me as strange. Afterwards I made inquiries of Mr. Lindo,

without telling him my reason, and learned that Mr. Clode had no business at that cupboard—which was, in fact, devoted to the rector's private papers.'

'Perhaps, Mr. Clode, you will explain that,' said the lawyer with quiet triumph.

He might have denied it had he spoken out at once. He might have given Jack the lie. But he saw with sudden and horrible clearness how this thing fitted that other thing, and this evidence corroborated that; and he lost his presence of mind, and for a moment stood speechless, glaring at his new accuser. He did not need to look at the archdeacon to be sure that his face was no longer grave only, but stern and suspicious. The gas-jets flared before his eyes and dazzled him. The room seemed to be turning. He could not answer. It was only when he had stood for an age, as it seemed to him, dumb, and self-convicted before those three faces, that he

summoned up courage to mutter, 'It is false. It is all false, I say!' and to stamp his foot on the floor.

But no one answered him, and he quailed. His nerves were shaken. He, who on ordinary occasions prided himself on his tact and management, dared not now urge another word in his own defence lest some new piece of evidence should arise to give him the lie. The meaning silence of his accusers and his own conscience were too much for him. And, suddenly snatching up his hat, which lay on a chair beside him, he rushed from the room.

He had not gone fifty yards along the pavement before he recognised the mad folly of this retreat—the utter surrender of all his hopes and ambitions which it meant. But it was too late. The strong man had met a stronger. His very triumph and victory had gone some way towards undoing him, by

rendering him more open to surprise and less prepared for sudden attack. Now it was too late to do more than repent. He saw that. Hurrying through the darkness, heedless whither he went, he invented a dozen stories to explain his conduct. But always the arch-deacon's grave face rose before him, and he rejected the clever fictions and the sophisms in support of them, which his ingenuity was now so quick to suggest.

How he cursed the madness, the insensate folly, which had wrecked him ! Had he only let matters take their own course and stood aside, he would have gained his ends ! For a minute and a half he had been as good as rector of Claversham. And now !

Laura Hammond, crossing the hall after tea, heard the outer door open suddenly behind her, and, feeling the cold gust of air which entered, stopped and turned, and saw him standing on the mat. He had let himself

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in in this way on more than one occasion before, and it was not that which in a moment caused her heart to sink. She had been expecting him all day, for she knew the crisis was imminent, and had been hourly looking for news. But she had not been expecting him in this guise. There was a strange disorder in his air and manner. He was wet and splashed with mud. He held his hat in his hand, as if he had been walking bareheaded in the rain. His eyes shone with a wild light, and he looked at her oddly. She turned and went towards him. 'Is it you?' she said timidly.

'Oh, yes, it is I,' he answered, with a forced laugh. 'I want to speak to you.' And he let drop the *portière*, which he had hitherto held in his hand.

There was a light in the breakfast-room, which opened on the hall, and she led the way into that room. He followed her and closed the door behind him. She pointed to a chair,

but he did not take it. 'What is it?' she said, looking up at him in real alarm. 'What is the matter, Stephen?'

'Everything!' he answered, with another laugh. 'I am leaving Claversham.'

'You are leaving?' she said incredulously.

'Yes, leaving!' he answered.

'To-night?' she stammered.

'Well, not to-night,' he answered, with rude irony. 'To-morrow. I have been within an ace of getting the living, and I—I have lost it. That is all.'

Her cheek turned a shade paler, and she laid one hand on the table to steady herself. 'I am so sorry,' she murmured.

He did not see her tremor; he heard only her words, and he resented them bitterly. 'Have you nothing more to say than that?' he cried.

She had much more to say—or, rather, had she said all that was in her mind she

would have had. But his tone helped her to recover herself—helped her to play the part on which she had long ago decided. In her way she loved this man, and her will had melted at sight of him standing downcast and defeated before her. Had he attacked her on the side of her affections he might have done much—he might have prevailed. But his hard words recalled her to her natural self. ‘What would you have me say?’ she answered, looking steadily across the table at him. Something, she began to see, had happened besides the loss of the living—something which had hurt him sorely. And as she discerned this, she compared his dishevelled, untidy dress with the luxury of the room, and shivered at the thought of the precipice on the brink of which she had paused.

He did not answer.

‘What would you have me say?’ she repeated more firmly.

‘If you do not know, I cannot teach you,’ he retorted, with a sneer.

‘You have no right to say that,’ she replied bravely. ‘You remember our compact.’

‘You intend to keep to it?’ he asked scornfully.

She had no doubt about that now, and she summoned up her courage by an effort. ‘Certainly I do,’ she murmured. ‘I thought you understood me. I tried to make my meaning clear.’

Clode did not answer her at once. He stood looking at her, his eyes glowing. He knew that his only hope, if hope there might be, lay in gaining some word from her now—now, before any rumour to his disadvantage should get abroad in the town. But his temper, long restrained, was so infuriated by disappointment and defeat, that for the moment love did not prevail with him. He

knew that a tender word might do much, but he could not frame it. When he did at last find tongue it was only to say, 'And that is your final decision?'

'It is,' she answered in a low voice. She did not dare to look up at him.

'And all you have to say to me?'

'Yes, all. Except that I wish you well. I shall always wish you well, Mr. Clode,' she muttered.

'Thank you,' he answered coldly.

So coldly, and with so much composure, that she did not guess the gust of hatred of all things and all men which was in his heart. He was beside himself with love, rage, disappointment. For a moment longer he stood gazing at her downcast face. But she did not look up at him; and presently, in a strange silence, he turned and went out of the room.

CHAPTER XXV

HUMBLE PIE

THE success of reticence is great. Mr. Bonamy and his nephew, as they went home to tea after their victory, plumed themselves not a little upon the proof of this which they had just given Mr. Clode. They said little, it is true, even to one another, but more than once Mr. Bonamy chuckled in a particularly dry manner, and at the top of the street Jack made an observation. ‘You think the archdeacon was satisfied?’ he asked, turning to his companion for a moment.

‘Absolutely,’ quoth Mr. Bonamy; and he strode on with one hand in his pocket, his coat-tails flying, and his money jingling in a

manner inimitable by any other Claversham person.

At tea they were both silent upon the subject, but the lawyer presently let drop the fact that the earl had accepted the rector's resignation. Jack, watchfully jealous, poor fellow, yet in his jealousy loyal to the core, glanced involuntarily at Kate to see what effect the news produced upon her; and then glanced swiftly away again. Not so swiftly, however, that the change in the girl's face escaped him. He saw it flush with mingled pride and alarm, and then grow grave and thoughtful. After that she kept her eyes averted from him, and he talked busily to Daintry. 'I must be leaving you to-morrow,' he said by-and-by, as they rose from the table.

'You will be coming back again?' Mr. Bonamy answered, interrupting a loud wail from Daintry. It should be explained that Jack had not stayed through the whole of

these weeks at Claversham, but had twice left for some days on circuit business. Mr. Bonamy thought he was meditating another of these disappearances.

‘I should like to do so,’ Jack answered quietly, ‘but I must get back to London now.’

‘Well, your room will be ready for you whenever you like to come to us,’ Mr. Bonamy replied with crabbed graciousness. And he fully meant what he said. He had grown used to Jack’s company. He saw, too, the change his presence had made in the girls’ lives, and possibly he entertained some thoughts of a greater change which the cousin might make in the life of one of them.

So he was sorry to lose Jack. But Daintry was inconsolable. When she and Kate were alone together she made her moan, sitting in a great chair three sizes too big for her, with her legs sprawling before her, her

hands on the chair-arms, and her eyes on the fire. 'Oh, dear, what shall we do when he is gone, Kate?' she said disconsolately. 'Won't it be miserable?'

Kate, who was bending over her work, and had been unusually silent for some time, looked up with a start and a rush of colour to her cheeks. 'When who is gone—oh, you mean Jack!' she said rather incoherently.

'Of course I do,' Daintry answered crossly. 'But you never did care for Jack.'

'You have no right to say that,' Kate answered quickly, letting her work drop for the moment. 'I think Jack is one of the noblest, the most generous—yes,' she continued quickly, 'the bravest man I have ever known, Daintry.'

Her voice trembled, and Daintry saw with surprise that her eyes were full of tears. 'I never thought you felt like that about him,' the younger girl answered penitently.

‘Perhaps I did not a little while back,’ Kate answered gently as she took up her work again. ‘I know him better now, that is all.’

It was quite true. She knew him better now. A fellow-feeling makes us wondrous kind. Love, which blinds our eyes to some things, opens them to others. Had Jack offered Kate ‘Their Wedding Journey’ now she might still have asked him to change the book for another, but assuredly she would not have told him its title sounded silly, nor hurt his feelings by so much as a look.

It was quite true that she thought him all she said, that her eyes grew moist for his sake. But his was the minute only; the hour was another’s. Daintry, proceeding to speculate gloomily on the dulness of Claversham without Jack, thought her sister was attending to her, whereas Kate’s thoughts were far away now, centred on a fair head and a bright

boyish face, and a solitary room in which she pictured Reginald Lindo sitting alone and despondent, the short-lived brilliance of his Claversham career already extinguished. What were his thoughts, she wondered. Was he regretting—for the strongest have their hours of weakness—the step he had taken? Was he blaming her for the advice she had given? Was he giving a thought to her at all, or only planning the new life on which he must now enter—forming the new hopes which must henceforth cheer him on?

Kate let her work drop and looked dreamily before her. Assuredly the prospect was a dull and uninviting one. Before *his* coming there had always been the unknown something, which a girl's future holds—a possibility of change, of living a happier, fuller life. But now she had nothing of this kind before her. He had come and robbed her even of this, and given her in return only

regret and humiliation, and a few—a very few—hours of strange pleasure and sunshine and womanly pride in a woman's influence nobly used. Yet would she have had it otherwise? No, not for all the unknown possibilities of change, not though Claversham life should stretch its dulness unbroken through a century.

She was sitting alone in the dining-room next morning, Mr. Bonamy being at the office, and Daintry out shopping, when the maid came in and announced that Mr. Lindo was at the door and wished to see her. 'Are you sure that he did not ask for Mr. Bonamy?' Kate said, rising and laying down her work with outward composure and secret agitation.

'No ; he asked particularly for you, miss,' the servant answered, standing with her hand on the door.

'Very well ; you can show him in here,' Kate replied, casting an eye round her, but

disdaining to remove the signs of domestic employment which met its scrutiny. 'He has come to say good-bye,' she thought to herself; and with a little gasp she schooled herself to play her part fitly and close the little drama with decency and reserve.

He came in looking very thoughtful. She need not have feared for her father's papers, her sister's dog's-eared Ollendorf, or her own sewing. He did not so much as glance at them. She thought she saw business in his eye, and she said as he advanced, 'Did you wish to see me or my father, Mr. Lindo?'

'You, Miss Bonamy,' he answered, shaking hands with her. 'You have heard the news, I suppose?'

'Yes,' she replied soberly. 'I am so very sorry. I fear—I mean I regret now, that when you——'

'Asked for advice'—he continued, helping her out with a grave smile. He had

taken the great leather-covered easy-chair on the other side of the fireplace, and was sitting forward in it, toying with his hat.

‘Yes,’ she said, colouring—‘if you like to put it in that very flattering form—I regret now that I presumed to give it, Mr. Lindo.’

‘I am sorry for that,’ he answered, looking up at her as he spoke.

She felt herself colouring anew. ‘Why?’ she asked rather tremulously.

‘Because I have come to ask your advice again. You will not refuse to give it me?’

She looked at him in surprise; with a little annoyance even. It was absurd. Why should he come to her in this way? Why, because on one occasion, when circumstances had impelled him to speak and her to answer, she had presumed to advise—why should he again come to her of set purpose? It was ridiculous of him. ‘I think I must refuse,’

she said gravely and a little formally. 'I know nothing of business.'

'It is not upon a matter of business,' he answered.

She uttered a sigh of impatience. 'I think you are very foolish, Mr. Lindo. Why do you not go to my father?'

'Well, because it is—because it is on a rather delicate matter,' he answered impulsively.

'Still I do not see why you should bring it to me,' she objected, with a flash in her grey eyes, and many memories in her mind.

'Well, I will tell you why I bring it to you,' he answered bluntly. 'Because I acted on your advice the other day; and that, you see, Miss Bonamy, has put me in this fix; and—and, in fact, made other advice necessary, don't you see?'

'I see you are inclined to be somewhat

ungenerous,' she answered. 'But if it must be so, pray go on.'

He rose slowly and stood leaning against the mantelshelf in his favourite attitude, his foot on the fender. 'I will be as short as I can,' he said, a nervousness she did not fail to note in his manner. 'Perhaps you will kindly hear me to the end before you solve my problem for me. It will help me a little, I think, if I may put my case in the third person. Miss Bonamy'—he paused on the name and cleared his throat, and then went on more quickly—'a man I know, young and keen, and at the time successful—successful beyond his hopes, so that others of his age and standing looked on him with envy, came one day to know a girl, and, from the moment of knowing her, to admire and esteem her. She was not only very beautiful, but he thought he saw in her, almost from the first hour of their acquaintance, such noble and

generous qualities as all men, even the weakest, would fain imagine in the woman they love.'

Kate moved suddenly in her chair as if to rise. Then she sat back again, and he went on.

'This was a weak man,' he said in a low voice. 'He had had small experience; let that be some excuse for him. He was entering at this time on a new field of work in which he found himself of importance and fancied himself of greater importance. There he had frequent opportunities of meeting the woman I have mentioned, who had already made an impression on him. But his head was turned. He discovered that for certain small and unworthy reasons her goodness and her fairness were not recognised by those among whom he mixed, and he had the meanness to swim with the current and to strive to think no more of the woman to

whom his heart had gone out. He acted like a cur, in fact, and presently he had his reward. Evil times came upon him. The position he loved was threatened. Finally he lost it, and found himself again where he had started in life—a poor curate without influence or brilliant prospects. Then—it seems an ignoble, a mean, and a miserable thing to say—he found out for certain that he loved this woman, and could imagine no greater honour or happiness than to have her for his wife.’

He paused a moment, and stole a glance at her. Kate sat motionless and still, her lips compressed and her eyes hidden by their long lashes, her gaze fixed apparently on the fire. Save that her face was slightly flushed, and that she breathed quickly, he might have fancied that she did not understand, or even that she had not heard. When he spoke again, after waiting anxiously and vainly for

any sign, his voice was husky and agitated. 'Will you tell me, Miss Bonamy, what he should do?' he said. 'Should he ask her to forgive him and to trust him, or should he go away and be silent?'

She did not speak.

'Kate, will you not tell me? Can I not hope to be forgiven? He was stooping beside her now, and his hand almost touched her hair.

Then, at last, she looked up at him. 'Will not my advice come a little late?' she whispered tremulously and yet with a smile—a smile which was at once bright and tearful and eloquent beyond words.

Afterwards she thought of a dozen things she should have said to him—about his certainty of himself, about her father; but at the time none of these occurred to her. If he had come to her with his hands full, it would certainly have been otherwise. But

she saw him poor through his own act, and her pride left her. When he took her in his arms and kissed her, she said not a word. And he said only, 'My darling!'

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The rich can afford to be niggardly. Lindo did not stay long, the question he had to put once answered, his claim to happiness once allowed. When Mr. Bonamy came in half-an hour later, he found Kate alone. There was an austere elation in his eye which for a moment led her to think that he had heard her news. His first words, however, dispelled the idea. 'I have just seen Lord Dynmore,' he said, taking his coat-skirts on his arms and speaking with a geniality which showed that he was moved out of his everyday self. 'He has—he has considerably surprised me.'

'Indeed?' said Kate, blushing and con-

scious, half-attentive and half given up to thinking how she should tell her own tale.

‘Yes. He has very much surprised me. He has asked me to undertake the agency of his property in this part of the country.’

Kate dropped her sewing in genuine surprise. ‘No?’ she said. ‘Has he, indeed?’

Mr. Bonamy, pursing up his lips to keep back the smile of complacency which would force its way, let his eyes rove round the room. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I do not mind saying here that I am rather flattered. Of course I should not say as much out of doors.’

‘Oh, papa, I am so glad,’ she cried, rising. An unwonted softness in her tone touched and pleased him.

‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘I am to go over to the park to morrow to lunch with him and talk over matters. He told me something else which will astonish you. He has be-

haved very handsomely to Mr. Lindo. It seems he saw him early this morning, after having an interview with the archdeacon, and offered him the country living of Pocklington, in Oxfordshire—worth, I believe, about five hundred a year. He is going to give the vicar of Pocklington the rectory here.’

Kate’s face was scarlet. ‘But I thought—I understood,’ she stammered, ‘that Mr. Clode was to be rector here?’

‘Not at all,’ said Mr. Bonamy, with some asperity. ‘The whole thing was settled before ten o’clock this morning. Mary told me at the door that Lindo had been here since; so I supposed he had told you something about it.’

‘He did not tell me a word of it!’ Kate answered impulsively, the generous trick her lover had played her breaking in upon her mind in all its fulness. ‘Not a word of it! But, papa’—with a pause and then a rush of

words—‘he asked me to be his wife, and I—I told him I would.’

For a moment Mr. Bonamy stared at his daughter as if he thought she had lost her wits. Probably since his boyhood he had never been so much astonished. ‘I was talking of Mr. Lindo,’ he said at length, speaking with laborious clearness. ‘You are referring to your cousin, I fancy.’

‘No,’ Kate said, striving with her happy confusion. ‘I mean Mr. Lindo, papa.’

‘Indeed! indeed!’ Mr. Bonamy answered after another pause, speaking still more slowly, and gazing at her as if he had never seen her before, nor anything at all like her. ‘You have a good deal surprised me. And I am not easily surprised, I think. Not easily, I think.’

‘But you are not angry with me, papa?’ she murmured rather tearfully.

For a moment he still stared at her in

silence, unable to overcome his astonishment. Then by a great effort he recovered himself. 'Oh, no,' he said, with a smack of his old causticity, 'I do not see why I should be angry with you, Kate. Indeed, I may say I foretold this. I always said that young man would introduce great changes, and he has done it. He has fulfilled my words to the letter, my dear!'

CHAPTER XXVI

LOOSE ENDS

DR. GREGG was one of the first persons in the town to hear of the late rector's engagement. His reception of the news was characteristic. 'I don't believe it!' he shrieked. 'I don't believe it! It is all rubbish! What has he got to marry upon, I should like to know?'

His informant ventured to mention the living of Pocklington.

'I don't believe it!' the little doctor shrieked. 'If he had got that he would see her far enough before he would marry her. Do you think I am such a fool as to believe that?'

'But you see, Bonamy—the earl's agency

will be rather a lift in the world for him. And he has money.'

'I don't believe it!' shrieked Gregg again.

But, alas! he did. He knew that these things were true, and when he next met Bonamy he smiled a wry smile, and tried to swallow his teeth, and grovelled, still with the native snarl curling his lips at intervals. The doctor, indeed, had to suffer a good deal of unhappiness in these days. Clode, about whom he had boasted largely, was conspicuous by his absence. Lord Dynmore's carriage might be seen any morning in front of the Bonamy offices. And rumour said that the earl had taken a strange fancy to the young clergyman whom he had so belaboured. Things seemed to Gregg and to some other people in Claversham to be horribly out of joint at this time.

Among others, poor Mrs. Hammond found

her brain somewhat disordered. To the curate's unaccountable withdrawal, as to the translation of the late rector to Pocklington, she could easily reconcile herself. But to Mr. Lindo's engagement to the lawyer's daughter, and to the surprising intimacy between the earl and Mr. Bonamy, she could not so readily make up her mind. Why, it was reported that the earl had walked into town and taken tea at Mr. Bonamy's house! Still, facts are stubborn things; it is ill work kicking against them, nor was it long before Mrs. Hammond was heard to say that the lawyer's conduct in supporting Mr. Lindo in his trouble had produced a very favourable impression on her mind, and prepared her to look upon him in a new light.

And Laura? Laura, during these changes, showed herself particularly bright and sparkling. She was not of a nature to feel even defeat very deeply, or to philosophise much

over past mistakes. Her mother saw no change in her—nay, she marvelled, recalling her daughter's intimacy with Mr. Clode and the obstinacy she had exhibited in siding with him, that Laura could so completely put him out of her mind and thoughts. But the least sensitive feel sometimes. The most thoughtless have their moments of care. Even the cat, with its love of home and comfort, will sometimes wander on a wet night. And there are times when Laura, doubting the future and weary of the present, wishes she had had the courage to do as her heart bade her, and make the plunge, careless what the world, and her rivals, might say of her marriage to a curate. For Clode's rugged face and masculine will dominate her still. Though a year has elapsed, and she has not heard of him, nor probably will hear of him now, she thinks of him with regret and soreness. She had not much to give, but to her sorrow she

knows now that she gave it to him, and that in that struggle for supremacy both were losers.

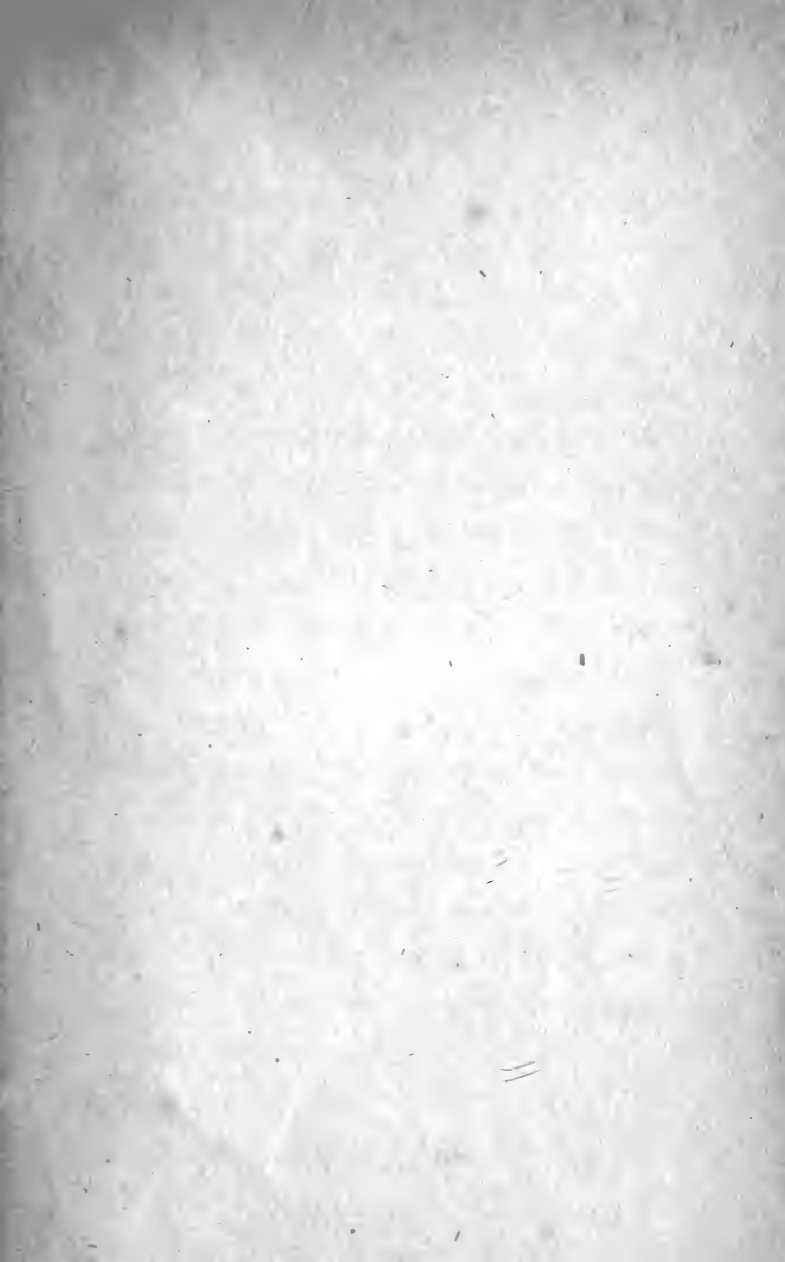
The good wine last. Kate broke the news to Jack herself, and found it no news. 'Yes, I have just seen Lindo,' he answered quietly, taking her hand, and looking her in the face with dry eyes. 'May he make you very happy, Kate, and—well, I can wish you nothing better than that.' Then Kate broke down and cried bitterly. When she recovered herself Jack was gone.

If you were to describe that scene to Jack Smith's friends in the Temple they would jeer at you. They would cover you with ridicule and gibes. There is no one so keen, so sharp, so matter-of-fact, so certain to succeed as he, they say. They have only one fault to find with him, that he works too hard; that he bids fair to become one of those legal machines which may be seen any evening taking in fuel

at solitary club tables, and returning afterwards to dusty chambers, with the regularity of clockwork. But there is one thing even in his present life which his Temple friends do not know, and which gives me hope of him. Week by week there comes to him a letter from the country from a long-limbed girl in short frocks, whose hero he is. Time, which like Procrustes' bed, brings frocks and legs to the same length at last, heals wounds also. When a day not far distant now shall show him Daintry in the bloom of budding womanhood, is it to be thought that Jack will resist her? I think not. But, be that as it may, with no better savour than that of his loyalty, the silent loyalty of an English friend, could the chronicle of a Bayard—much less the tale of a country town—come to an end.

THE END.







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